

Kazuki Amamiya

ill. Gin

New Game +

START?

► Yes No

3

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+





Kazuki Amamiya

ill. Gin

New Game +

START?

► Yes No

3

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue: On a Moonlit Night](#)

[Chapter 1: Aim for the Best Summer Ever!](#)

[Chapter 2: Your Dream and a Secret Connection](#)

[Chapter 3: Swimsuit Season with Fireworks, a Barbecue—and Love](#)

[Final Chapter: The End of a Miraculous Summer](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue: On a Moonlit Night

A boy and a girl sat on top of the breakwater, gazing at the ocean shrouded in darkness. During the daytime, the beach was crowded with people, but no one was around now. Apart from the gentle lull of waves, silence engulfed the world. Beyond the horizon, the full moon floated in the cloudless night sky and illuminated the dark watery expanse. Moonbeams reached the shore, creating a path of white light on the sand—it was a magical sight.

A tepid, salty sea breeze blew through the jetty; the girl's long hair tickled the cheek of the boy sitting beside her. Suddenly, he looked at the girl. Her clear, jewellike eyes reflected his face.

"It's surprisingly cool," the girl said.

"The sun's not out and the wind is blowing, after all," replied the boy.

"The sea breeze is pretty strong, so we might get sticky if we stay out in it too long." The girl giggled at the thought.

"Hey... Did I help you?" the boy asked.

She smiled and nodded. "Of course you did. If you weren't here, I couldn't have done anything."

"I'm glad, then," he said, relieved.

"Say..." the girl whispered in a clear voice.

"The moon is beautiful, isn't it?"

The boy understood the feelings she was trying to convey. He gazed at the girl, who was looking up at the moon, and took a deep breath. He put his slow mind into full gear to come up with a phrase that would make her happy.

"It's because I'm watching it together with you," he finally said.

Hearing his words, the girl broke out into a smile—like a blooming flower.

Chapter 1: Aim for the Best Summer Ever!

“So hot...”

Sweltering heat assailed us as we left the school. It was the middle of July—the height of blistering summer weather. The temperature was over thirty-two degrees Celsius, and I felt like my body was on fire. I was merely walking, but my stamina was depleting at a startling rate.

“This is the worst summer ever...” Nanase muttered. She plodded along next to me, looking like she was at death’s door.

Well, with this heat, yeah... According to the Japan Meteorological Agency, it’s going to be hotter than normal this year. Apparently Gunma’s going to have it especially bad; something about being surrounded by mountains and foehn winds or whatever makes the terrain heat up easier.

“Nanase, you hanging in there?” I asked. “You look really pale.”

“Can...we take a break?” She pointed at the vending machines lined up against the side of the road.

“Course,” I said with a nod.

I bought an iced coffee. Nanase must’ve been extremely parched because she bought a sports drink for herself. She quickly gulped it down and aahed, refreshed.

“I feel alive again.”

“Are you really okay? It’s not heatstroke, right?”

“You don’t need to worry so much. I was just a little dehydrated, that’s all.”

We were at a mini rest stop on the riverside road that led from the school to the station. There were three vending machines and two benches basking in the shade, fortunately enough. It felt a few degrees cooler already. This spot had become a usual hangout location for the students of our school, but due to the unbearable heat, no one was loitering around.

“Can you really work like this? Don’t push yourself,” I pressed again.

“Yeah... I’m sorry. I’m sleep-deprived because I’ve been studying for finals.” Her tone sounded a bit weary, just as I feared. “I’ll recover after I get some rest.”

She tried to reassure me, but I couldn’t dismiss my concerns. After all, Nanase didn’t have a strong constitution; she’d already missed school a few times due to getting sick.

“Haibara-kun, you’re such a worrywart.” She let out a relaxed little giggle.

Huh? What the— You can’t smile like that! That’s way too gosh darn cute! I stan my Nanase today too...

Oblivious to the fact that I was internally geeking out, Nanase asked, “Haibara-kun, how did you do on the tests?”

Is this small talk to pass the time while we rest? Her complexion seems better, so I guess she really is recouping okay. “Hmm. I don’t think I did bad,” I replied, accepting the topic change.

Our finals had ended just last week. We’d gotten our tests back, but they hadn’t announced the overall results or ranks yet. Those would likely come out in two or three days.

“Quite the lukewarm response... You’ll rub people the wrong way with excessive humility. Mainly me,” she complained, lips pursed into a pout.

“So *just* you? But those really are my honest thoughts.” A wry smile crept onto my face, and I shrugged my shoulders. “I gotta say, I scored a bit low in English.”

“How many points did you get? You don’t have to say if you don’t want to, though.” She sounded like she was trying to respect my privacy, but her tone oozed curiosity.

I wasn’t the type to hide my test scores, so I answered her honestly. “Eighty-nine points.”

The warmth in Nanase’s eyes faded further. “If that’s low, then mine must be abysmal.”

She's kinda cute when she sulks. I let out a half-assed laugh to smooth over the subject. *What am I supposed to say in situations like this?* Proper responses were a constant worry of mine lately, what with all the compliments I'd been getting. I decided to ask a harmless question instead. "Nanase, are you bad at English?"

"If I had to say, it's one of my stronger subjects," she answered, turning away in a huff.

My attempt to drive the conversation in a more positive direction had failed. *So much for a "harmless question"!* I reached into my backpack and took out a snack to improve her mood. "Don't sulk. Here, you can have this." I dangled a cookie I'd bought from the convenience store in front of her.

She shot me an exasperated look. "I'm not even sulking. And I'm not an elementary schooler; don't think you can bribe me with sweets," she claimed, but snatched the cookie out of my hand and began eating it. The way she nibbled on it with her little mouth was reminiscent of a squirrel.

Mm-hmm. No choice but to stan... In spite of her cool appearance, Nanase actually liked sweets quite a lot. She often snacked on them during her breaks at work. From my observations, she especially liked chocolate and cookies.

"If I gain weight, how are you going to take responsibility?" Nanase was coming off more aggressive than usual today. She glowered at me, clearly displeased about something.

So I earnestly replied, "If that happens, then I'll go on a diet with you. Don't worry, if you exercise, you'll lose weight for sure!"

"For some reason...I find that oddly persuasive."

Well, that's because I've got firsthand experience with weight loss! With consistent, daily exercise, it'll all be fine. But for those of you reading along at home, don't try the reckless diet-exercise schedule I went on. You might die. "You're way too skinny in the first place, if you ask me. I think it'd be good for you to fatten up a bit," I remarked lightheartedly.

She looked conflicted at that. "Oh, there's fat, all right. It's just not visible right now."

Really? My eyes inadvertently dropped to Nanase's chest. But hey, there wasn't any deeper meaning behind that action.

"Haibara-kun?"

I looked back up and locked eyes with her at point-blank range. Our faces were close because we were sitting on the same bench. She looked somewhat flushed.

"A-All right then! We should get going. It's almost time for our shift!" I blatantly changed the subject and stood up.

Nanase sent a dissatisfied scowl my way, sighed, and then stood up as well. I began half walking, half running away. She trotted to catch up and took her place next to me.

"Come to think of it, I haven't worked in a while," she said.

"You haven't worked for about a week, right? I snuck in a few shifts."

During the testing period, the café owner had been in a bind because he lacked student part-timers, so I'd picked up some shifts since I was on my miraculous second round of high school and didn't need to study as much. I'd still taken fewer shifts than usual, so I was likely to land first place in our year again.

"If you don't study properly during exam season, your parents will scold you," Nanase grumbled.

I nodded in agreement. "Yeah, true that."

In the past, my mom would often get on my case and berate me. "Study up!" she'd yell all the time. I ignored her, though, since I was busy reading manga and light novels and playing games. She hadn't given me an earful this time because I'd placed first for our midterms.

"If I was first place, then maybe my parents would stop nagging me."

"Who knows? But that's unexpected. Nanase, do your parents rag on you?" I asked, surprised. She looked the type to study on her own without needing her parents to chew her out.

Abashed, she muttered, "If I play any games during exam season, my parents

will confiscate them.”

Wait, Nanase plays games?

“They’re annoying about games even when we don’t have tests. They always lecture me about only playing for one hour a day,” she continued.

Wow. Sounds like they treat you like you’re still in elementary school. I kept that thought to myself since it’d probably put Nanase in an even worse mood, and tried to keep the conversation innocuous.

“Nanase, what kind of games do you play?”

“Mostly rhythm games. I like RPGs too, though.” She then listed several popular rhythm games that even I had heard of. Apparently, she often played them at home or during her commute to school. “Do you play any? You’re good at singing, so I could see you being good at rhythm games too.”

“I’ve never played one before. I enjoy video games in general, though,” I replied. I was an otaku who liked stories, so I’d only ever played RPGs throughout middle school and high school. I’d gotten hooked on FPS games in college but had never tried any rhythm games. “But I *am* confident in my sense of rhythm.”

“Why don’t you try one? I’ll show you how to play after work today,” Nanase suggested. I had no reason to refuse, so I nodded. She smiled brightly and chuckled. “I can’t wait.”

We continued walking and chatting until we reached Café Mares. The cherry blossom trees that lined the road had bloomed with flowers in the spring, but now, instead of vibrant flower petals dancing in the air, the treetops were completely covered in green verdure. It was my second time experiencing high school, but the seasons transitioned just like they had during my first round.

Spring came and went, then came the rainy season, and now summer was in full swing. The brilliant sun shone over us, with cicada cries as our background music. I wiped the sweat lining my neck with a towel.

Now that our finals were over, only a week remained until summer break.

“Now then, to celebrate that we all avoided flunking... Cheers!” Uta gleefully raised a cup brimming with cola into the air.

It was around 8 p.m. at Café Mares. Uta, Reita, and Tatsuya had come to visit Nanase and me while we were on the clock. Everyone had received good test results, so we were having a celebratory get-together.

“Uh, did you have to say ‘avoided flunking’? How about a normal celebration because tests are over?” Reita asked with a sarcastic smile and a shrug.

Nanase giggled. “Merely avoiding failing really isn’t something to celebrate,” she teased Uta.

“Sh-Shut up! Tests are a matter of life or death for us!” Uta rebutted with her cheeks puffed up. She turned to Tatsuya, who was seated next to her, and began shaking him by the shoulders aggressively. “Right, Tatsu?!”

“You’re so friggin’ loud! Also, don’t lump me in with you. I didn’t barely scrape by this time like you did,” he replied in an annoyed tone as she shook him back and forth.

As Tatsuya had said, his grades weren’t too bad this time. He’d probably averaged around fifty points on all the subjects. It was a considerable improvement compared to his performance on our midterms. Uta had barely passed all the subjects, so it really wasn’t fair to put them in the same boat.

“Grrr... That’s true, I guess. You’ve betrayed me!”

“No, you just didn’t grow. Unlike you, I actually learned from last time and diligently studied every day.”

“Huh?! That’s not something Tatsu would say! What happened to you?!”

In contrast to Uta’s panicked expression, Tatsuya wore a smug smile.

“Well, if that’s all you amounted to after diligently studying, then I don’t think that’s much to brag about,” Reita remarked casually.

Damaged by Reita’s scolding words, Tatsuya held his head. “Don’t you think your remarks cut too deep sometimes?”

“Sorry, sorry. It irritated me a bit that you were boasting so much,” Reita said with that same pleasant smile of his.

Um, Reita-san? You’re kinda scary right now, you know? Tatsuya looked pitiful, cradling his head in his arms, so I placed my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t feel down. Your scores are way better than last time.”

“You’re the only one I *don’t* want to be encouraged by! You’re probably rank one in the grade again.” Tatsuya threw a sharp glare my way and smacked my hand off of his shoulder.

Ugh, he’s incomprehensible!

“Natsuki has a point, though. You worked hard this time, Tatsuya,” Reita said, retracting his previous statement.

“Yeah?” Tatsuya grumbled with a sour look, but he did seem a little happy.

Reita was the one who’d made Tatsuya feel so down in the first place, but he easily overrode his insult and cheered Tatsuya back up. This was a technique Reita used often. And it reinforced exactly why he was so popular with girls.

“Shiratori-kun, since you’ve said so much, how did you do?” Nanase inquired.

“The same as always. I probably scored lower than you did, Nanase-san.” Reita reached into his bag and took out a clear file. Inside were the tests the teachers had returned to him. After a quick mental calculation, I estimated he’d averaged around eighty points.

“Heh. I beat Shiratori-kun. I’m quite pleased about that!” Nanase tugged on the cuff of my shirt and smiled at me.

Huh? Why’d you do that? Why are you beaming at me so happily?! Argh, you’re too cute! I bellowed internally. *I wish Nanase was more self-aware of how pretty she is. She often says she likes girls with cute faces, but she’s one of them too!* Contrary to my internal raving, I responded with gentleness and warmth. “Yes, yes. Good for you.”

She furrowed her brows. “Except it’s not good. I lost to you, Haibara-kun.”

Oh, come on! What is the correct response here?! I wondered, sulking a bit.

She giggled quietly. “I’m sorry. It’s been so much fun tormenting you lately!”

“Uh-huh, is that so?” *Just do whatever you want. I can take anything as long as you’re enjoying yourself!*

We continued discussing the tests after that: things like how the math test was difficult, how world history was strangely easy, how to solve that one problem on the physics test, or how our English teacher was heartless—we had a plethora of topics to chat about. However, Nanase and I were still working. There weren’t many customers at this time, but if we loitered around for too long, the manager would scold us.

“All right, take your time, guys. We’ll be clocking out soon,” I said.

“Okaaaay! We’ve got to get going soon, though!” Uta replied.

Nanase and I ended the conversation there and returned to our tasks. Recently, Uta, Reita, and Tatsuya had started stopping by Café Mares on a regular basis after they finished their club activities, usually on days when Nanase and I were both on the job. It worked out since we could accompany them for a bit so late in the evening. Plus, it was past dinnertime, so the store was pretty relaxed.

“Come to think of it, where’s Hoshimiya? Not here because of her strict curfew?” I asked Nanase, who was cleaning nearby.

“Her parents aren’t very flexible. It’s out of the question for her to stay out this late,” she replied.

“Huh... I see.”

Nanase seemed to know Hoshimiya’s parents quite well. The two of them had known each other since middle school, so perhaps that was just a given. I was curious about Hoshimiya’s environment at home, but I didn’t want to ask anything that might come off as impolite, so I hesitated.

“Would you be happier if Hikari were here?” Nanase asked teasingly.

I shrugged. “Nah, I just think it’d be more fun if everyone got to hang out together on days like this.”

As of late, I no longer lost my composure when Nanase and Reita teased me and instead replied coolly. *I’m a far cry from the old me who used to act sus*

every time someone talked to him. Haven't I matured? Okay, fine, all I did was tell the truth... Of course I want to spend more time with Hoshimiya!

"True. Hikari is quite jealous whenever we all gather at night."

"Yeah, she cries about it over RINE a lot. 'I want to go too!'" I said, imitating the messages she'd send to our group chat.

Nanase stopped cleaning and stared towards the table where Uta and the others were chatting. "I wish I could do something for her," she murmured.

"For Hoshimiya?" I questioned.

She nodded and continued laying out her thoughts. "I understand why she has a curfew, but that aside, there are other things that Hikari is limited by. Her dad is a bit too strict." It was a rare occurrence when Nanase sounded like she was complaining. She was Hoshimiya's longtime childhood friend, so perhaps she'd heard the gripes firsthand.

"I kinda had a feeling things were like that for her."

"He's quite stubborn. He doesn't listen to Hikari's opinions at all." Nanase gazed out the window, reminiscing about something from the past, and sighed.

That's a toughie. You can't really meddle with other people's home life. Just because someone's upbringing is strict, it doesn't necessarily mean that the parents are in the wrong. We're only Hoshimiya's friends, so there's not much we can do to interfere... In the first place, she might not even want us to do anything about it. I don't know if it's actually a problem. But there is one thing that tickles my curiosity.

"Would it be hard for Hoshimiya to go on a trip with everyone?" I asked.

Summer break would arrive in a week. It was our long vacation that we'd all been eagerly awaiting. We hadn't decided on the specifics yet, but the six of us had been discussing plans to go somewhere together. We'd been talking about little aside from our tests recently, but it was about time to iron out those details. Above all, this was a monumental youth event for me. *If Hoshimiya can't come...then I'll be super sad. She said herself that she wanted to go to the ocean, though.*

“Hmm... I’m sure Hikari wants to go with us, but who knows if she can? Maybe it would be possible if it were a short day trip, but you’re all expecting something that will involve staying the night, based on your discussions, right?” Nanase remarked.

“Well... Yeah, I guess so. We don’t have a concrete plan yet, though.”

“I think it’ll be difficult for her to go on an overnight trip that’ll also have boys there. I wish I could convince her parents that it’s fine since I’ll be there too, but I don’t know if that would be enough.”

“I see...” I uttered.

Hoshimiya is just that cute. Her parents are probably worried that she might get hassled by some strange guys, so there’s no helping it. Even I’d be hesitant to let her walk home alone at night. My parents get overprotective of my little sister too, but they pretty much let me do anything. Boys and girls just face different risks when it comes to these sorts of things.

“In the end, we won’t know unless we ask. We’d better make plans first,” Nanase said, bringing our conversation to an end.

Right, it’s just as she says. We shouldn’t be worried about getting parental permission at this point in time. If Hoshimiya can’t go after we propose a plan to her parents...then that’s just that... I want to go with her, but in the end, that’s only my hope.

“I’ll think up a few places we could go,” I said. Even without Hoshimiya in the picture, there was still money, dates, the place, and so on to consider. *Before I bounce ideas around with everyone, I should ask Miori what she thinks first.*

After I got home, I took a shower and withdrew to my room since I’d already eaten dinner at Café Mares. I was done preparing for bed, so I texted Miori, “You free right now?” I waited a few minutes, but she didn’t read the message. *Is she asleep already?* Just as I thought that, my phone rang.

“Nice! You’re still awake!” I said when I answered.

“I just got out of the bath. Need something?” she asked.

“I wanted to ask you for help cooking up plans for summer break.”

Miori and I conversed over the phone quite often these days. We used to meet up at the nearby park to talk, but it was too hot, and Miori’s parents worried about her walking outside at night.

“Oh, yeah. You guys wanted to go to the mountains or the ocean, right?”

“Yep. We’re leaning towards staying the night by the ocean,” I replied. Hoshimiya had said she wanted to go to the ocean. Plus, when people spoke of summer, beaches were the first thing that came to mind. When I asked the others for their opinions on the subject, the majority of us had preferred the ocean over the mountains too.

“Don’t you just want to see Uta and Hikari-chan in swimsuits?” Miori asked accusingly.

“N-No... Not really,” I denied.

“I heard a little pause in your response just now.”

“Shut it! Calling me out on that was uncalled for!” *If anyone asks, yes, I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about it once. And yes, if anyone asks whether I’d want to see them in swimsuits or not, of course I’d really like to. I want to see Nanase in a swimsuit too, okay?!*

As if she knew the creepy thoughts running through my head, Miori giggled. “Hmm? Oh, really? Well, I guess you truly are a boy.”

“Quiet, just let me go. My main reason is obviously because I want to play at the beach!”

“By the way, I just took a bath, so I’m only wearing underwear right now. It’s hot in here.”

“Don’t throw in unnecessary information!”

How can I not imagine it?! That must’ve been what she was after. I would never picture my childhood friend in a dubious way...is what I wish I could confidently declare. Miori is too stunning for me not to be aware of her as the opposite sex at this point. Of course, I would never tell her that. It’d definitely go to her head!

“Anyway, so you’re set on an overnight trip?” She seamlessly continued the conversation after riling me up.

“Yeah. It’ll take a while to travel to the ocean from Gunma, after all.” If we wanted to play on the beach to our hearts’ content, staying the night would be ideal. We would be too tight on time if we went for a day trip.

“I agree, but it’ll be costly.”

“Nanase and I have been saving up from our part-time work, so the problem is the other four.”

“I heard from Uta that she gets some allowance for helping out at her family’s okonomiyaki shop.”

“Oh, really? Then the biggest problem will be...Tatsuya,” I said conclusively. Reita had mentioned he’d been saving up, so I wasn’t worried about him. On the other hand, Tatsuya often groaned about not having money, on account of his all-too-frequent snack-buying habits at the convenience store. “Maybe he can scrape together enough if we only stay for one night?”

It’ll cost about ten thousand yen to stay one night at a cheap hotel. And traveling expenses will be a few thousand yen... No, that’ll depend on which beach we go to. We’ll also need some cash to use on the day of. The whole trip will probably cost twenty or thirty thousand yen, and that’s an optimistic estimate. Ugh! Money concerns are always a headache.

It was a lot of money, even for me. I’d had plenty of funds back when I was a college student because I had the option of working part-time or attending lectures, but I didn’t have much money saved up now. Only three months had passed since I’d started working.

“Yeah, staying two nights would be too much. It’ll be hard for people to be free three days in a row logistically speaking too,” Miori said.

“True. The rest of them have club activities, after all.”

Nanase and I could adjust our shift schedules, but Uta, Reita, and Tatsuya couldn’t skip practice. Hoshimiya was probably fine since her club didn’t have mandatory meetings over the long break. Regardless, we’d need to plan around when everyone had a day off from club activities.

“Well, I think there’ll be opportunities where everyone will be free, like around the Obon holidays. Here’s what the girls’ basketball club’s got planned.” Miori sent me an image via RINE. It was a picture of a printout of their summer break practice schedule. Sure enough, the girls’ team did have periodic rest days slated in. But it *was* jam-packed with their training regime and practice games. “More importantly, shouldn’t you pick a place? I think you should discuss with everyone and then decide, but you should find a few candidates first. You’re the one with the most free time, after all.”

“Oh, shush. I’m busy enough with my job and working out.”

“Oooh? You’re still working out every day? I don’t think you need to anymore, though.”

“It’s not about whether I need to or not. Working out is wonderful, I’ll have you know! It solves everything.” *Why didn’t I work out before now? I don’t know. If you work out, the world changes. Exercise is justice!*

“Ew, gross...”

“Hey! Don’t actually sound disgusted by that!” *My glass mentality will shatter. Working out has a function too: it’s critical to maintain my physique since I’m not part of a club, and it’s also a good way to kill time.*

“Oh, but if you’re gonna let loose at the beach, muscles are pretty important! Toned bodies are really attractive. Hold on—is that what you’re going for?”

After a beat, I said, “I never thought about that before.” *Right. Wearing a swimsuit means being seen in one too. Well, I don’t mind people looking at me...but I’d better tighten up my abs a bit... Yeah, just a bit. I don’t really care that much about it or anything.*

“Well, if working out is your hobby, then I guess you don’t have to worry about your muscles now,” Miori said with a sleepy yawn.

“Anyway, aren’t we talking about the location?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. I guess the go-to is Niigata, right? Or if you want to be by the Pacific Ocean, then Ibaraki,” she suggested.

Yeah. Distancewise from Gunma, it’s gotta be one of those two prefectures.

“Here, don’t one of these places look good?” she continued.

I tapped on the link that Miori sent. It led to a site that listed a bunch of beaches in Niigata. It’d been a while since I’d seen any beach pictures, and I was awed by their beauty, which roused my desire to go even more. *I’ve been to Niigata before when I was a kid; there are a ton of beaches there, and I’m sure it’d be beautiful and pleasant no matter which one we chose. Maybe going there again would be nice.*

The two of us continued to chat as we researched different options. When I realized the time, the hands of the clock were aligned at the apex. There was a small pause in our conversation, and Miori yawned once more.

“We should get to sleep,” I said.

“Yeah... We didn’t finalize anything, but I think we’ve got the options pretty much settled. Now all you gotta do is talk to them and decide. I’m curious, so tell me what you guys pick, okay?” Her gentle tone reached me through the phone.

I also heard a hint of loneliness, so I spontaneously asked, “Do you think it’d be hard for you to come too?”

Miori was the type of person to passionately gun for the guy she liked. I’d expected her to say she wanted to come with us too if Reita was going. However, it didn’t sound like she was thinking about that at all.

“It’d be pretty hard for me to barge in on the six of you,” she replied.

“But it’s *you* we’re talking about. Aren’t you pretty friendly with all of us?”

“Sure, but I’m still in a different class, so I’m not really part of your normal friend group. I’m sure you guys have a vibe going on when it’s just the six of you, right? I’d hate to make things awkward by forcing my way in.”

Every point of Miori’s take on the situation was realistic. I didn’t know how to retort against such sound logic and sank into silence.

She giggled. “Oooh, what’s this? Are you going to get anxious if I’m not around?”

“No, I just thought it’d be more fun if you came too.” Memories of my

childhood flashed through my mind. It was always fun whenever Miori was around because she'd take the lead. That's why the idea had struck me: add Miori to our usual six, and we would surely experience the closest possible thing to my ideal youth.

"O-Oh, really? But that's just your wish in the end."

She's right. Just because I want her to come doesn't mean everyone else will be down. Well, I bet Reita would approve. I know how he feels about Miori now, after all... Man, who would've thought that he'd already be into Miori! He doesn't talk much about himself, so I never noticed. I was really surprised when he told me. But that doesn't mean I can just spill the beans to her. They'd get together faster if I just blurted it out since I know how they both feel, but that's not up to me to decide. And Reita told me because he trusted me to keep it on the down-low.

I'd retreated into the recesses of my mind, but Miori broke the silence between us. "A-Anyway, I'm going to bed now, okay? Good night," she said.

"Yeah, it's late already. Thanks for bouncing ideas with me," I replied and hung up. *Is it just me, or did she start talking weirdly fast and sound kinda flustered? Did something happen? It's a bit suspicious but too late to ask now. Ah, well, whatever. I've got school tomorrow, so I'd better hit the hay too.*

I often waffled about whether I should leave the air conditioner on or off when I slept in the summer. If I kept it on, my throat usually got irritated and sore, but if I turned it off, I often woke up in the middle of the night because of how sweaty I got. There were trade-offs, so I usually decided what to do based on the temperature of that day.

I left the AC on tonight and closed my eyes. My consciousness immediately sank into a deep slumber.

The next day, I headed to school with my throat feeling a bit under the weather. I took the train from my town and got off at Maebashi station. As I walked down the tree-lined road, someone tapped on my shoulder from behind.

“Morning, Natsuki-kun!”

I turned to see a beautiful girl beaming at me. *No, she’s the cutest girl in the world!* “Hey! Morning, Hoshimiya.”

She came up beside me and calmed her slightly ragged breathing. She’d likely spotted me walking up ahead and ran to catch up to me. “Wow, it’s hot again today!” she commented.

The mornings were cool, but it only felt that way relative to the rest of the day in summer. Covered in sweat because she’d run, Hoshimiya grabbed the front of her shirt and fanned her chest. Inadvertently drawn to the gesture, I accidentally caught a glimpse of her alabaster skin beneath her shirt. Realizing that I’d unintentionally peeped, I averted my gaze in a panic. *Hoshimiya is too defenseless when it comes to this sorta stuff*, I thought.

“It’s great that the trees shade the road, huh?” I said.

She and I occasionally bumped into each other like this during our commute to school. The other guys had practice in the morning, so I never encountered them. Well, I did sometimes see Nanase, but her demeanor looked kinda lifeless in the morning, and she always exuded this incredible aura that said, *“I don’t want to talk right now, so don’t you dare say a word to me!”* So we pretty much never spoke.

“Oh, right! I heard you all hung out at the café yesterday, right?” Hoshimiya asked, her cheeks swelling up to an unnatural size. She sounded disgruntled.

“Nanase and I had work yesterday. The others came to talk about the tests.”

“Hmm? How nice...” she said wistfully. “I felt pretty good about my results this time around, so I wanted to brag about them too.”

“Really? I’ll lend you an ear, so go ahead and brag to your heart’s desire!”

“It’s not bragging when I’m talking to our grade’s number one student,” Hoshimiya said sulkily, lips pouting. Her expression soon returned to neutral, and she bowed her head towards me. “But my grades did go up because you and Yuino-chan helped me. I’m grateful, you know? Thank you.”

Just like we had for our midterms, the six of us held study sessions for our

finals. Last time, Nanase had tutored Hoshimiya, but this time, I'd had many opportunities to teach her too. Hoshimiya had likely come to me with questions often because of my midterm results.

"Heh heh. My grades rose, and summer vacation is almost here—I'm feeling great today!" With light steps, Hoshimiya moved in front of me, turned around, and smiled. She'd seemed so displeased just moments ago, but her expression was fickle and changed in a snap.

"Yeah, summer break is coming right up. Hoshimiya, do you have any plans?" I asked, half to gather intel for my plan and half just out of curiosity.

"Hmm. I'm basically just going to laze around my room, you know? It's hot outside, after all. The literature club is going to meet once a week, but attendance is optional so I don't *have* to go. Oh, but there are a ton of novels I want to read! I'm backlogged, so I've gotta get reading," she replied and then asked, "What about you, Natsuki-kun?"

"I'll probably just work as much as I please at the café. But I don't have any commitments, so I'll clear out my schedule if anyone invites me to hang out. When I'm at home, I'll read my way through the novels you recommended to me."

"Oooh, sounds nice! Maybe I should recommend a few more since we're on the topic!"

"Please do! I'm not in any clubs, so I feel like I'm going to have time to spare over vacation," I said.

If everyone were part of the go home club like me, we'd all have plenty of chances to hang out, but they're all busy with their club activities. I don't have any lingering attachment to the basketball club anymore. Still, maybe joining a club would give me a stronger dose of youth juice over the long break. Ah well, no point in mulling over that now!

"Okay!" Hoshimiya exclaimed with an enthusiastic nod, but then her brows knit together in a frown. "We're going to get a ton of homework for summer break, though. Just thinking about it makes me grumpy!"

Right, if memory serves, we're going to get a lot of homework—enough that

working on it for a few days won't cut it. I'm not in any clubs, so I'll be fine, but it'll definitely be rough for the club crew. We'll have to do it anyway, so might as well turn summer homework into another youth event, I reasoned.

"We'll finish it if we all work together. Let's have some study parties!" I suggested. *We can meet up at Café Mares or a family restaurant by the station. Hitting the books alone in silence isn't much fun, so I'd rather do it while making small talk with my friends.*

"Oh, that's a good idea! I'll feel at ease with you teaching me!"

Hoshimiya and I continued chatting about stuff like that as we walked, and we soon reached the school. We passed through the gates and headed to the entrance. My alone time with her was drawing near its end. *Now is probably a good time to throw out that question.*

"There's also the topic of going on a trip with everyone. Hoshimiya, you said you wanted to go to the ocean, right?" I asked, trying to keep my tone as natural as possible.

Her cheerful mood suddenly plummeted. "Yeah... It'd be fun if we could all go together." Her response was nondescript. Clearly she wanted to go, but the way she'd worded it sounded like she knew it was unlikely she'd be able to come with us. Hoshimiya looked at me apologetically, as if she'd sensed that I was feeling out her situation. "Sorry. I said I wanted to go to the ocean, but I might not be able to."

I hesitated and then asked, "Because your parents won't let you go?"

"I brought it up to papa in passing, but he didn't seem very receptive to the idea. I really want to go, though," she explained. "Did you possibly hear something from Yuino-chan?"

"She told me you might not be able to go. She didn't provide more details than that, though," I replied.

With a dark expression, Hoshimiya muttered, as if to complain, "Papa is very stubborn. If he says no once, he'll pretty much never change his mind. Ugh, that rock head. I really wish I could do something..."

This was my first time hearing Hoshimiya say something negative about a

person, let alone a family member.



That's why I unwittingly blinked at her—it was a new and surprising impression.

Realizing my shock, she blushed in embarrassment. “S-Sorry! Gosh, what am I saying out of the blue...? I’m so ashamed.”

“Oh, no. If anything, it feels easier to talk to you about, y’know? I just witnessed a rare moment,” I assured her.

“J-Just forget I said that! Jeez, Natsuki-kun!”

Hoshimiya was adorable when upset, so I shrugged my shoulders in defeat. “Okay, okay.”

Right then, we entered the school building and changed from our outdoor shoes into our indoor ones.

“A-Anyway, I’ll work something out with papa!” Hoshimiya balled her hand into a fist in front of her chest and uttered, “I can do it!”

“I’d be happy if you could come too...but don’t push yourself, okay? We’ll have plenty of other chances to hang out as a group. Maybe we can go somewhere else for a day trip,” I said. If we didn’t have to stay somewhere overnight, Hoshimiya’s dad might permit her to go. It wouldn’t be enough time to amble about the beach, though. Gunma prefecture didn’t border any oceans, after all.

“Still, I want to go to the ocean. I’m the one who suggested it too,” she murmured, absentmindedly staring into the distance.

“Do you like the ocean that much?” I asked.

“Hmm, yeah, I do. It’s beautiful and feels nice and cool. Also...zoning out at the great blue makes me feel like my worries are just a drop in the bucket, which cheers me up.” Words streamed out of her mouth, as if she wasn’t even thinking about it, and lingered in my mind. Hoshimiya gasped and quickly put on a smile. “B-But I’m perfectly happy with going to other places too! Anywhere will be a blast if I’m with you guys!” It sounded like she was trying to gloss over the subject, but she wasn’t exactly lying either.

“Got it. We’ll see what the others say. Let’s meet up somewhere,” I said.

“Yeah, roger dodger!” She gave me a sharp salute to display her assent. We made our way through the bustling halls until we reached class 1-2.

“Morning, everyone!” Hoshimiya exclaimed as we opened the door.

Inside the classroom, we saw the familiar faces of our classmates as they conversed listlessly. The lackadaisical atmosphere of the room quickly flourished with Hoshimiya’s arrival as she greeted everyone with a dazzling smile. It made me wonder if she was aware of just how much influence she held over our class. And yet I couldn’t imagine what was going on inside her head—I had no way of knowing.

Every person has their own problems to worry about. I thought I had understood that already, but when I’d heard Hoshimiya talk about her issues, I’d found myself feeling surprised. That was because I’d only ever known the perpetually bright and smiling side of her.

I love Hoshimiya Hikari.

I fell for her appearance at first sight, and I’ve also been charmed by her kindness. But I don’t know her very well. Without a doubt, I only understand her on a surface level. And that’s why I want to learn more about her, I thought genuinely to myself.

During lunch break that same day, I summoned everyone to the school cafeteria so we could deliberate our summer vacation plans. I’d considered gathering at a family restaurant or a café, but the club crew would be busy after school. Plus, if we wanted to go all out over our vacation, we shouldn’t waste money eating out.

Reita slurped up his kakiage udon and finished off the broth before opening his mouth. “Natsuki’s right. It’s about time we lay out the specifics of our plan.”

“We’re talking about going to the beach, right?” Uta asked as if she’d just remembered. In front of her was a large shoyu ramen that didn’t match her small stature.

“But I don’t have much money left,” Tatsuya grumbled as he voraciously shoveled spoonfuls of large-sized curry into his mouth.

“Tatsu, if you tell your mom that you’re going on a trip, won’t she give you some money?” Uta suggested.

“I guess she might fork over some cash, but who knows? I *do* wanna go, though,” he replied.

As expected, money is the first issue. “Tatsuya aside, is everyone else good on money?” I asked. The rest of the group nodded.

“I’ve got a decent amount saved up,” Reita replied.

“I help out at our restaurant every now and then, so I’m good too!” Uta exclaimed.

“Like you, Haibara-kun, I’ve been working quite hard, so I should have sufficient funds,” answered Nanase.

“Me too. I think my allowance will be enough,” Hoshimiya said.

Pretty much what Miori and I predicted. Which means Tatsuya’s the only problem.

“How much is the trip gonna cost? We’re staying overnight, right?” Tatsuya asked, peering into his wallet. His expression was very grim.

“It depends on where we go and where we stay. Thirty thousand yen is probably enough for the whole trip,” I answered. That estimate was made under the assumption that we would stay at a cheap hotel, but traveling expenses would be a big blow to our funds since we’d likely need to take the bullet train.

“Well, that’s a realistic assessment,” Nanase said in agreement.

Tatsuya frowned and let out a low grunt. “There’re tons of things I wanna do with you guys too...”

“Figure something out, so we can all go together! Just think about it: summer at the beach! It’ll definitely be awesome!” Uta eagerly tried to talk him up. Then, as if she’d just thought of something, her eyes began to twinkle. “I know! Tatsu, why don’t you work at our shop over the break? You used to help out

sometimes in the past!”

“Oh, yeah, I did do that,” Tatsuya said as he looked at her with blank eyes. “I’ve got practice during the day, so I can pretty much only work at night. Is that okay?”

“Yeah! We’re looking for a new part-timer, so this is perfect timing! I’ll ask my parents!” she replied with an exceptionally bright smile.

“It’s hard for Tatsuya to work a new job when he has practice all the time, so a temp summer job at Uta’s place is definitely a good idea,” Reita remarked calmly. “Not bad.”

“Tatsu’s worked at our place a few times already, so he’s experienced, which is great for us too!” Uta said, beaming blissfully.

It’s certainly a win-win situation, or rather, a two-birds-one-stone type of deal. Looks like a great solution was close at hand this whole time! It really is best to discuss problems like this with everyone... But imagining Uta and Tatsuya working together is unsettling my heart a bit. Suddenly, the night of the Tanabata festival flashed through my mind. Even now, I could still vividly recall the sensation of Uta’s lips on my cheek.

“This is how I feel.”

I had said nothing in response to her words. She had told me not to reply—surely because she’d detected my hesitation. I was taking advantage of Uta’s kindness right now. *I shouldn’t feel this way about Uta and Tatsuya being together... I get it. What I’m feeling now is jealousy. I know how she feels about me, but I’ve held off on replying. And now I don’t want her to get closer to other guys.*

I’m not allowed to feel this way. I shook my head to rid myself of those thoughts and changed mental gears before rejoining the conversation. “Cool. Sounds like money is no longer an issue, then.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t take on that many shifts, so it’s still gonna be rough for me,” Tatsuya complained.

“It’s going to be rough for me too. We need to plan this trip to be as inexpensive as possible,” Reita added. There was a short pause in our

conversation, so he brought up the next problem. “Before we start, we have to match up our schedules. I’m sure everyone has club activities or other stuff, so we’ll have to plan around things.”

At that, everyone took out their smartphones or notebooks to check their summer schedules. After some cross-checking, we found that August 6 and 7 would work for all of us. There were a few more one-off dates when everyone was available, but it would’ve been pretty hard to sync up two other days in a row.

Everyone had a break from their club activities during Obon, but most planned to visit their grandparents during that period. So we settled on the sixth and seventh. It was also huge that I now knew what days people were free. I planned on holding homework sessions over the long vacation, after all. Plus, the knowledge would make it easier to invite people to hang out too.

“Now that we’ve confirmed dates, all that’s left is...the location,” Reita said with a small frown as he stared at his phone, likely looking up some possible choices.

If anyone had thought of a place instantly, then I would’ve let them take the wheel, but based on their contemplative expressions, it didn’t look like anyone had anything in mind. So I proposed the locations that Miori and I had come up with. “I’ve got a few options. How about somewhere in Niigata?”

I placed my phone on top of the table and showed everyone the website that listed a bunch of beaches as I gave a more in-depth description of each place. They leaned in close to look at my phone screen, and we all ended up huddling close together. I was particularly conscious of Hoshimiya; she was so close that her shoulder was basically stuck to mine.

There’s something about girls that always makes them smell nice. O-Oh no... At this rate, my explanations are going to come flying out of my head! I’m the center of the discussion right now—I’ve gotta keep it together...

“Wow! This place looks suuuper pretty!” Uta exclaimed. She watched Hoshimiya and me touching shoulders with a peculiar look on her face.

I pretended not to notice her gaze. “Y-Yeah. I’ve actually been here before. It’s a nice place.”

“Yeah, isn’t this place good? It’s the closest beach from Gunma too,” Reita said. He was our group’s designated voice of authority, and no one objected, so we all settled on the number one candidate Miori and I had come up with.

Uta also fervently agreed, eyes sparkling. “Let’s go here! It’ll definitely be fun!”

“I’ve got a few options if we choose this place. I thought it’d be nice if we took this opportunity to stay at a cottage.” I showed them a site that listed the cottages Miori and I had looked into. “What do you guys think? They look like this.”

Uta tilted her head to the side quizzically. “A cottage?”

“They’re basically villas we can rent. It’d be like renting a single-family home.” I showed her a picture on my phone. It was of a wooden building quietly situated along a mountain path in the countryside. It had a kitchen, dining room, living room, and even a spacious terrace. The second floor was lined with individual rooms.

“Oooh! This looks great!” she exclaimed.

“Hey, we could have a barbecue on the terrace. Let’s stay here,” Reita said as he reviewed the website.

That comment got a big reaction out of Tatsuya. “What?! We’re gonna eat *meat*? All right, let’s go with that!”

“You do know that if we stay at a cottage, we’ll have to buy our own meat and grill it ourselves, right?” Nanase pointed out in an exasperated tone.

“Isn’t that fine? That’s got a kind of... What’s the word?” Tatsuya cocked his head to the side for a moment to think and then gave her an optimistic reply. “Doesn’t it have some panache to it?”

“Ah ha ha! Tatsu’s using hard words!” Uta cackled.

“What’s so funny about that?!” he yelled, face wrenched with emotion.

These two have really done well to return to their natural state of banter after all that awkward air.

“But won’t a place like this be expensive?” Nanase questioned.

I was prepared for this concern, though. “It’s actually pretty cheap. This is the cost for staying one night, but...” I opened up the calculator on my phone and quickly input the numbers. “If we split the cost between the six of us, it’ll go down to this. Look.”

“Oooh!” everyone uttered, impressed.

“Isn’t that cheaper than staying at a hotel in the same area?” Reita commented.

“Yeah, I think so. It looks expensive at a glance, but we’re splitting the price between six people. It’d be even cheaper if we went with more people; though, sizewise, I think this cottage maxes out at eight or nine people,” I explained.

We could hold a barbecue at this lodging, and it had plenty of space. That did mean we’d need to prepare our meals and baths on our own, but it shouldn’t be too much work since we were only staying for one night. After I’d finished disclosing this information, everybody’s response was quite positive.

“Thanks, Natsu. You must’ve put a lot of thought into this, huh?” Uta said, her expression suddenly softening.

“Well, I do have the most free time. I just looked through random sightseeing websites,” I said with a shrug.

Tatsuya crossed his arms. “Natsuki’s clutch, as always. A whiz like you thought this up, so it’s pretty much settled, then.”

“Yeah, Natsuki’s proposal sounds solid all around,” Reita said in agreement.

I secretly sighed in relief. *It was worth staying up late with Miori to brainstorm.*

“And, hey, if it’d be cheaper, then why don’t we invite some more people?” Tatsuya suggested, money occupying his mind.

“Yeah! It’ll be more fun with more people!” Uta said, on board with his suggestion for clearly different motives.

“I understand your logic, but won’t it be a bit awkward for other people to suddenly mingle with our group?” Nanase objected with a stern look on her face.

“You think so? I think any of our classmates would be fine.” Uta tilted her head, puzzled.

Well, Uta is friends with people outside of our group and treats them exactly the same as us. It's not just her, though. Everyone besides me gets along just fine with other people.

“Sure, but we normally hang out as a set group of six, so a single outsider might find it a little daunting to join in. And they probably have their own friend group,” Reita said with a hard look.

I was of the same opinion, so I backed him up in the form of a question. “On the flip side, do we have anyone in mind?”

No one has a specific person in mind right now. It'd be great if we could name someone in particular, but if we can't, then we don't need to go out of our way to get anyone else on board. I don't think our plus-one would like it if we invited them by process of elimination either. My goal for this special summer event is to have as much fun as possible. And even without forcing ourselves to bring more people, I think this trip will be plenty fun with the six of us.

“Someone who meshes well with all of us and can keep up with our vibe if they come with... Hmm...” Tatsuya muttered the prerequisites aloud.

As I'd predicted, no one came to mind—but then, someone shattered that prediction.

“I'd wanna go with Miorin and Seri!” remarked Uta.

Miorin is Miori, but who's Seri?

“Oh, good idea! They both get along well with all of us!” Hoshimiya chimed in her agreement.

It had weighed on my mind how little Hoshimiya had spoken up until now, but there was no sign of gloom in her tone. *I wondered if she had a reason for staying quiet, but I guess there was no special meaning behind her silence? Also, “they get along with all of us”? I don't even know anyone named Seri, though!*

Reita glanced my way and then agreed with a soft smile. “I'm on board too. It'll definitely be fun if those two come.”

Even someone as dense as I was could understand why he'd looked at me. He wanted me to concur as well. I knew that Reita was interested in Miori, after all. *Reita's probably thinking this will be the perfect chance to get closer to Miori if she comes with us... Well, even if I don't read too deep into it, he might just want to hang out with her. He didn't sound like he was lying when he said it'd definitely be fun.*

"So we'd be splitting the cost by eight?" Still worried about money, Tatsuya punched the numbers into his phone's calculator. His face turned all smiles, and he eagerly assented. "Oh, it's pretty cheap now. Let's invite 'em!"

What's the word...? He's a calculating guy...when it comes to money, anyway.

"Miori-san is Haibara-kun's childhood friend too, so isn't that perfect?" Nanase commented.

Everyone nodded. *Wait, aren't we all ignoring the biggest question?* "Um... Who's Seri?" I tentatively asked.

I'd thought it was a basic question, but everyone blinked in surprise. *Huh? Why do you all look like the answer is obvious? Am I just out of the loop because it's a nickname? But no one who'd have that nickname comes to mind...*

"What? Natsu, you've never hung out with Seri before?" Uta asked, astonished.

Before I could respond, Reita interjected first. "Come to think of it, Natsuki might be the only one who hasn't talked to her... No, wait, I'm pretty sure you met her at our café study group. Though maybe you didn't talk much."

With those words, the memories flashed back to me. *Ohhh. The blonde, fashionable girl who sat across from Miori!* "Oh, yeah, Miori's talked about her a few times. I know the two of them are close." *If memory serves, her name is Serika. Ah, I see, Uta got "Seri" from Serika.* "Wait a sec, are you all friends with Serika?"

They all shared a look for a moment and then Nanase answered. "She went to the same middle school as Hikari and me."

"Tatsuya and I went to the same elementary school as her," Reita said. "Uta went to a different school, though."

I... I see... I didn't expect them to have that kind of connection.

"Me and Miorin are tight, so I talk to Seri a lot these days!" Uta added.

Ah, so everyone besides me is pretty close to this Serika... And if everyone else is already friends with Miori and Serika, then they certainly are the perfect duo to invite.

"If Natsuki's never talked to her before, then maybe we shouldn't go with them?" Reita said out of consideration for me.

"Nah..." I reflexively shook my head. *Reita wants to go with Miori. Heck, I think it'll be a blast if Miori comes too. If all it takes is for one person I've never talked to before to tag along, then it's no big deal! If anything, this is a chance for me to expand my circle of friends.* "It's fine. Let's invite them."

The conversation I'd had with Miori last night popped into my mind.

"Oooh, what's this? Are you going to get anxious if I'm not around?"

"No, I just thought it'd be more fun if you came too."

She declined when I asked her to come, but now Serika makes another good reason for Miori to say yes. And most important of all, everyone suggested they both come without any nudging from me. Surely she'll change her mind...

"If Natsuki-kun's okay with it, then let's ask them and see what they say. If they decline, we'll just have to go with the six of us," Hoshimiya proposed.

"I'll invite them pronto. I'll let you guys know over RINE what they tell me," Reita said, concluding the topic.

We continued bouncing ideas and discussing minor details, when Hoshimiya suddenly spoke up. "Um... Actually, I haven't gotten permission from my papa to go on this trip," she hesitantly said. Her tone was dark, a complete one-eighty from just moments ago. "I might not be able to go. Sorry."

Everyone seemed to have guessed that already—perhaps they'd heard from Nanase. No one looked surprised, but the mood did take a dreary dive. I searched for something to say, but Uta spoke up first, changing the atmosphere with her bright timbre.

"Don't sweat it, families are like that sometimes. Although, I do hope we can

go together, Hikarin!”

Unexpectedly, Tatsuya was the next person to follow up. “Can’t we do something about that? It’ll definitely be less fun if you can’t come with.”

It was unheralded to hear Tatsuya say that to Hoshimiya. Everyone exchanged looks, thinking the same thing. Hoshimiya blinked at him, shocked.

“Wh-What’s with you guys? Is it *that* weird to hear that coming from me?” Tatsuya asked.

“Oh, no, n-not at all! I’m thrilled to hear that! Th-Thanks!” Hoshimiya frantically denied, but it was plain for all to see that she was discombobulated.

“Hoshimiya-san, you’re clearly rattled.” Seeing her flustered, Reita burst out in laughter as he held his stomach.

Tatsuya shot me a funny look, but I was stumped as to what to say.

“A-Anyway, I’ll do my best so I can come too!” she declared.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help and report back soon. So can you all wait a little longer?” Nanase said as she patted Hoshimiya on the head.

Everyone bobbed their heads cheerfully, and right then, the end-of-lunch-break bell rang.

A few days later, we heard that Miori and Serika had readily accepted Reita’s invitation. I’d been calling Serika by her given name for convenience’s sake, but I learned that her full name was Hondo Serika. *I should call her Hondo-san, then. If I get the opportunity, I’d like to properly introduce myself to her.*

Also, with Nanase’s help, Hoshimiya had apparently succeeded in persuading her father. When she sent our group chat a message informing us of her achievement, it gave me peace of mind for the moment.

“Hey!”

“Gweh!”

I was walking down the hallway before morning homeroom started when someone suddenly pulled on me from behind. I felt them grabbing the collar of

my button-down. *The only person who'd do this is Miori!*

"What the heck do you want?!" I cried.

"Was it your suggestion?" she asked.

Don't respond to my question with a question! And besides, haven't you ever heard of context? Ah well, I guess it's fine since I know what you're talking about. "It wasn't. Uta and Reita were the ones who suggested it. And then everyone else endorsed the idea, saying they wanted to go with you and your friend. Though, apparently another reason was because they're all friends with Hondo-san."

"I did hear about that from Serika..." Miori admitted, though still not fully convinced.

"I thought you said you were down to go?"

"Well, yeah... Serika seemed eager to go, and I had no reason to decline."

"Then what's the big deal? I get to hang out with you too, so we're killing two birds with one stone."

She looked like she had mixed feelings about the trip, which baffled me. Strangely displeased, she got up on her tippy-toes for some reason and pinched my cheek.

"Ow!" I yelped. *Hey, if you do this in the middle of the hall, then people are gonna think we're dating!* I saw a few people eyeing us already.

"Anyway, even if the other five are friends with Serika, you've never interacted with her before, right?" Miori said.

"Yeah, but...it's cool. Won't it be fine if I just see it as a chance to make a new friend?"

The idea came out of my own mouth, but it didn't sound like a line of reasoning I'd normally have. I'd certainly improved to some extent, but it didn't change the fact that I was still a shy introvert at heart. There was no doubt that I had the least friends out of everyone in my friend group. After all, I was too much of a wimp to try to make any new ones. But confining myself to a world with the same six people forever wouldn't lead to my ideal youth. I needed to

muster up the courage to expand my horizons, even if only by a little at a time.

“Hmm.” Miori stared at my face and then said, “Well, I guess I’m okay with it if you’re okay with it.” Finished with our conversation, she turned away.

“Morning, Miori,” someone called out.

We simultaneously turned around to see who it was. *Speak of the devil and something whatever. It’s her!* The topic of our conversation, Hondo-san, was waving at us.

“Hey, Serika. G’morning!”

Miori shot back an extremely normal greeting, but what the heck am I supposed to do here? We both know each other by name through Miori, but we’ve never spoken before. I don’t think we’re close enough to say hello, but we are going on a trip together. And wouldn’t it be weird if I didn’t say anything since I’m standing right next to Miori, and they just greeted each other? Such socially anxious thoughts kept spinning round and round in my head.

Then, Serika looked at me and said, “Morning, Haibara-kun.”

“G-Good morning,” I replied after a split second of hesitation. It, too, was a very normal exchange. *O-Oh, right. I just needed to say good morning like a regular person... Why in the world was I floundering over this?*

I felt a mysterious sense of defeat, but Miori and Hondo-san paid no notice as they began chatting. Then, the two trained their gazes on me.

“Haibara-kun is going on the trip too, right?” asked Hondo-san.

“Yep! He’s not a bad guy, so be nice to him!” replied Miori.

“Nice to meet you, Haibara-kun,” she said.

“Y-Yeah. Nice to meet you too, Hondo-san,” I said with a fervent nod.

“M’kay, I’ll head in first,” Hondo-san said placidly and then walked into her classroom.

Phew... That made me oddly nervous!

Seeing me sigh in relief, Miori smiled dryly. “Serika’s pretty low energy. She’s always like that, so don’t overthink it.”

“Really? She’s not like that because it’s the morning or anything?” I asked in surprise. Nanase’s complexion looked ghastly and she had very low energy in the morning, so I’d figured Hondo-san was the same.

“Mm-hmm. That’s why she might not come off too sociable. It’s a shame since she’s so cute,” Miori said with pursed lips. “What a waste.”

She’s definitely well-dressed, but she’s not very expressive. I guess she just looks like an outgoing gal on the surface. “Do you think I can be friends with her?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine. That girl doesn’t really like or dislike anyone. And she’s not shy with strangers either. She might look intimidating, but she’s actually pretty easygoing.”

“Um, but I’m not good with strangers...”

“That’s a *you* problem that you’ll just have to get over. Didn’t you say this was your chance to make a new friend?”

“Now that I’ve talked to the actual person, I’ve suddenly lost all confidence...”

“Listen here, you,” Miori said. She looked fed up as she pressed on her forehead. But then, the morning homeroom bell rang. When we looked around, we realized that we were the only two people left in the hall. “Oh, shoot! I’ve gotta go. See you later!”

“Yeah, see you.”

I watched Miori hurry into her classroom and then opened the door to the class next to hers.

“You’re late, Natsuki,” Reita called out.

“I was talking to Miori about the trip,” I explained as I sat down.

Just as I did, our homeroom teacher strolled in. “All right. Summer vacation starts tomorrow, but remember that because you are students of our school, you’d better conduct yourself in a manner that befits our reputation. Also, I’m sure you’ve been assigned ample homework for the summer, but it’s an amount that’ll disappear if you diligently work on it day by day. Do not start on it too late. Got it? Yes, it’s a break, but...”

Our teacher began lecturing us about not losing focus over our long vacation, but the atmosphere of the classroom became antsy instead. The teacher was going off about rules and regulations at great length, but all the students in class began whispering to each other quietly and sharing hushed laughter.

While I was surveying everyone else, I made eye contact with Hoshimiya. Flustered, she averted her eyes but peeked at me one more time for reasons beyond me. She mouthed, *"I can't wait,"* and her expression loosened into a small smile.

My mind blanked for a moment. *Huuuh?! What was that?! That was way too freaking cute! Don't win over my heart so easily!* Just as I calmed my inner turmoil, the end-of-homeroom bell rang.

"All right. Be sure to conduct yourselves with discipline!" Our teacher, who'd been repeating the same message over and over, finally ended that long-winded spiel.

Lecturing us forever, same as always! We've got our end-of-term ceremony today, so we'll also be stuck listening to the principal's extremely long speech in the gym, which'll be blazing hot. I wish our homeroom could've been short and sweet to make up for that suffering!

As soon as our homeroom teacher left, the classroom burst back into loud chatter. Most of us were talking about our summer homework—namely, how there was too much of it. But there were plenty of other topics mixed in too: I overheard that one student wanted to go to the pool with their friends, and another couldn't wait to see the fireworks display. Someone else was going to host a *Smash Bros.* tournament at their friend's place, while another person would be going abroad with their family. Somebody said they had club activities every day and wished for more days off. There were a few complaints too, but everybody seemed to be in high spirits.

Brilliant sunlight shone through the window. The air conditioner was on and should've been cooling the room, but I felt a burning sensation on my skin nonetheless. Today was the closing ceremony of the first term. Apparently, it would be over thirty degrees Celsius today as well.

Starting tomorrow, our summer vacation would begin.

Chapter 2: Your Dream and a Secret Connection

I plunged into our summer vacation full of dreams and hopes... At least, that's how it should've been, but I didn't have any special plans the first week. Naturally I took on shifts every single day, but that wasn't enough to keep me busy.

I should've made more plans to hang out with people... Well, I used to be a loner otaku, so I excel at happily passing the time by myself. It wasn't the image of youth that I'd hoped for, but I spent the days in my own fulfilling way.

And so, another morning arrived. After I ate breakfast, I worked out—with extra focus on my abs in preparation for the beach—and then finished off my exercise with a jog. It was cooler than during the afternoon, but the midsummer heat was still fierce. I ran a moderate distance so as to not risk getting heatstroke, and took a shower at home to wash off the sweat.

Finished with my morning routine, I'd now entered free time territory. I read a novel Hoshimiya had recommended, watched a movie I'd rented from the video rental shop, and randomly searched for interesting YouTube videos. Before long, morning ended.

I typically made lunch on my own. My parents both worked full-time (my dad wasn't around much in general because he was assigned to a different prefecture for his job), so only Namika and I were home during the day over summer break. If I left our meals to Namika, we'd end up only eating cup ramen, so I had no choice but to cook. Okay, sure, we could've bought boxed lunches from the supermarket, but making the food myself would be cheaper and tastier. Either way, it was a hassle to go outside for groceries in this sweltering heat.

"Thanks, onii-chan. It looks yummy!"

"Hey, who said you could eat already?"

"But there's obviously two portions."

“You clearly have no appreciation for the chef.”

“But ‘thanks’ was the first thing I said!”

I was admonishing Namika for digging in without waiting, but she ignored my complaint. We were like this pretty much every day. Once Namika finished eating, she immediately went out to play with her friends.

“My little sister doesn’t care about her big bro...” I lamented as I got ready for work.

I had work in the afternoon on most days, and each day I took the train to Café Mares in the blistering heat. Usually the café was on my way home from school, so the commute wasn’t terrible, but on days when I had to go there from my home, it felt extremely far. *Maybe I made a mistake in picking this place for work...*

“Hello, Haibara-kun.”

My negative thoughts were completely negated by Nanase’s appearance.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“Nope, nothing. I forgot you were on deck today too,” I replied. *I can see Nanase at work. That alone is the incentive I need to work hard.*

“Mm-hmm. Let’s do our best today.” She looked at me with a smile.

I wish you wouldn’t point that smile of yours in my direction without a care in the world. I’ll end up falling for you! Heh. Nanase really is my soothing solace. Only Nanase saves me. I thank thee today too. While I was offering up prayers and channeling my fan power to Nanase, Kirishima-san pinched my ear.

“Don’t just stand there! Hurry up and get ready,” she scolded.

“Sorry,” I said sullenly. I couldn’t tell her that I was praying or about the other nonsensical thoughts that had been going through my head, so I just apologized meekly. I swiftly changed into my work uniform and punched in my time card.

It won’t hurt to save up money for my school life. I can’t let any youthful opportunities escape me just because I lack the funds. Therefore, working is a means to create the best youth ever! I’m not working because I have nothing better to do! Nuh-uh! I desperately tried to convince myself as I washed the

dishes.

“Haibara-kun, do you have a minute?” Nanase asked. It seemed like she was finished with working the floor for the moment. She sipped some water and let out a relaxed breath.

Honestly, even if Nanase weren't here, this job would still be pretty enjoyable. I like working in the kitchen, and I'm friendly with Kirishima-san and the other employees now. So I'm not dissatisfied with the current status quo. Though, I must say, I am a bit lonely because I haven't seen Hoshimiya at all. But it's only been a week! I guess I feel this way because I'm used to seeing her at school every day.

Uta's face suddenly flashed through my mind. *I want to see Uta too*, I thought spontaneously, which made me reprimand myself. *With these half-assed feelings, it'd be insincere of me to approach Hoshimiya, or to date Uta when she mustered up the courage to declare that she'd make me look her way. I'm fully aware of that.*

“Are you listening?” Nanase poked my cheek with her finger.

Don't touch me so easily! You devilish woman... I'll seriously fall for you, y'know?! No, no. If I fall for Nanase too, then my insides will be in chaos. I've got enough worries as it is, so please have mercy! Jokes aside, I really had accidentally sunk too deep into the recesses of my mind and completely ignored what Nanase was saying.

“Sorry, my bad. I was zoning out. What were you saying?” I said.

“It's nothing major,” Nanase prefaced and then asked, “Haibara-kun, do you have a bit of time after work?”

Hmm... I get off at 7 p.m. today, right? Nanase and I should be on the same shift, so it should be fine. “Yeah. I've got time today,” I replied.

She looked a bit relieved to hear that. “I'd like to go to the nearby shopping mall. Could you come with me?”

“The mall? Of course, no problem at all.”

The biggest local shopping mall was a ten-minute walk from Café Mares. It

was a handy place to go when I was unsure of what to do, and it was great for picking up daily necessities too. This was the first time Nanase had ever said she wanted to go to the mall together. In the past, she had asked me to come with her to the crepe shop or CD store on our way from school to work, or on our way home after work.

“Is there something you want to buy?” I asked.

“We’re going to the beach soon, right? I wanted to ensure I have all the necessities,” she replied.

“Oh, good point. We’d better start preparing.” I hadn’t given our trip much thought since it was still far off in the future, but there were definitely things I needed to buy as well, so this would be a good opportunity for me to tag along. Also, getting to shop with Nanase would be fire. “All right! Let’s go, go, go!” I deliberately answered as hyped as I could.

She smiled softly. “Okay, see you later, then.”

Her steps seemed somewhat sprightlier as she returned to the dining room floor.

When we left the café, the evening cicadas were crying. It was already past seven, but the sun had not completely fallen past the horizon yet. The clouds burned with the color of twilight. It looked like darkness would descend upon the sky at any moment.

“It’s much cooler now,” Nanase said in a cheerful tone as she walked next to me.

“If it were always this cool, then it’d be way more bearable outside,” I replied.

“True. I thought I was going to die on my way to work today.” She looked sick just recalling the heat from the afternoon and hung her head wearily. She was currently wearing a simple white T-shirt and a black pleated skirt.

She looks great in her work uniform, but her own clothes are cute too. If it weren’t summer vacation, I wouldn’t get to see her in casual clothes all the time. What a sight for sore eyes!

“So, what do you need to buy specifically?” I asked.

“Hmm. Sunscreen, a hat, a beach bag...” Nanase began listing various items.

I stayed next to her as we walked, matching my pace to hers. When I was on my own, I walked much faster than other people. That’s why when I was with my friends, I needed to make a conscious effort to slow down. Of my five friends, I’d spent the most time with Nanase. Now that I was able to pay attention to these small details to an extent, I could converse with her without any butterflies in my stomach.

“Also, I’d like to browse through some summer clothes,” she said.

The old me would’ve never believed there’d come a day when I could hang out with a girl without feeling nervous.

“And also,” Nanase continued as if she’d just remembered something else, “a swimsuit.”

N-Nanase’s swimsuit?! We’re going to choose one now?! O-Oh... Mm-hmm, I see. Why do I feel nervous all of a sudden? Why are my hands shaking?!

“I do want to pick up a swimsuit today...but you’d better not leer at me, okay?”

“O-Of course I won’t. Y’know, I was also thinking of picking one out too!” I said, voice cracking.

Nanase glowered at me, suspicious of the sudden squeaky enthusiasm in my tone, and pushed against my shoulder with her own. *Does this mean you don’t trust me?*

It instantly got cooler when we entered the shopping mall. The air conditioner was blowing on high and conversely actually made me feel too cold. It was right around dinnertime, so a lot of people were crowded around the restaurant section. I felt like I saw far more parents with their kids than usual because of summer vacation. There were also a lot of boys and girls our age coming and going in casual attire.

“Let’s stop by that supermarket,” Nanase said, sounding more chipper than

usual.

I obediently followed her in. It wasn't a good idea to oppose a girl when she was shopping. Never, ever say things like, "Haven't we been here for too long?" or, "Can we go already?" either. I'd learned these important lessons from Namika and my mom.

We wandered around the supermarket, buying various things for our trip. Nanase also went to a clothing store and picked out a hat, sandals, summer clothing, a beach bag, and so on. *I feel like she threw in some non-beach-related stuff too... Ah, well, she seems like she's enjoying herself, and that's what counts.*

"Huh? You're not gonna buy that?" I asked. Nanase had just put down the clothes she was looking at and left the store.

"I don't have infinite resources. I'm prioritizing beach necessities today... I'll refrain for now. Hmm. When I peruse stores, I always get an urge to buy things... It's not a good habit," she explained wistfully.

She continued on to the swimsuit section at our final stop. In contrast to how my nerves had jumped up several notches, Nanase rifled through the racks without a care. *Am I the crazy one for getting jitters looking at swimsuits with one of the beauty queens of my class?*

"How's this one?" She picked out a swimsuit and held it against her body. It was a triangle bikini with a simple design.

She's holding it over her clothes...but imagining her in that... I clammed up as the image took over my headspace. Nanase tilted her head to the side, puzzled by my sudden silence. Then, she looked down at her swimsuit, and her face gradually reddened.

"D-Didn't I tell you not to leer at me?" she said restlessly, suddenly realizing how embarrassing the situation was.

"I... I'm not! I'm not leering!"

"R-Really?"



“Y-Yes, right. Now that I’m thinking with a clear head, I feel like I’ve done something rude to Uta,” Nanase murmured in an abashed tone. I briskly walked out of the girls’ bathing suit section.

It’s good we settled on the safest outcome and decided to look around separately. I’m not disappointed. No way! Of course I’m not! What reason would I even have to feel that way?

After we both purchased our respective swimsuits, we met up in front of the store.

“What kind did you buy?” I asked. *Argh! I tried to use a normal voice, but don’t I just sound super curious and creepy? No, wait— Wouldn’t this be a natural topic of conversation after we both bought swimsuits?*

“It’s nothing special, just an ordinary swimsuit,” she replied.

“I’d be surprised if you bought one that wasn’t an ordinary swimsuit.”

“You’re going to see it when we go to the beach, so can’t you wait?”

“That’s true.”

“What about you?”

“Well, you’re going to see it at the beach, right?” I threw Nanase’s own words back at her. She pouted at me, displeased. “Sorry. Honestly, guy swimsuits are all basically the same shape anyway, so it’s not like there’s much difference between them,” I said as I showed her the contents of my shopping bag.

Nanase closely scrutinized the one I’d bought, murmured a small sound, and then looked away. *Yep, you definitely don’t care.*

“Huh?” Her eyes widened in surprise.

I followed her gaze, and there stood...

“Oh? Yuino-chan and Natsuki-kun?”

...Hoshimiya Hikari in a flower-patterned dress.

“Wow! It’s been so long!” She smiled warmly and quickly walked over to us.

Seeing her for the first time in days, coupled with her unfamiliar clothes, I was struck by how adorable she was. But I felt a strange air of malaise from her...because when I'd first seen her, she had been wearing a strikingly dark look. The moment she noticed us, her expression made an instant one-eighty to her usual bright smile.

"What're you two doing? Oh, on your way home from work?" she asked.

"That's right. We figured it would be good to buy necessities for the beach trip," Nanase answered.

"Wow, that sounds fun! What did you buy?" Hoshimiya asked.

Nanase began showing her the skin care products and other items she'd purchased. Hoshimiya gleefully looked through the goods.

"Hoshimiya, what brought you here?" I asked, once I felt the timing was right.

She looked uncomfortable and began beating around the bush. "Um, well, I'm actually here with my papa..." The moment she finally said that, we heard footsteps approaching us from behind.

"Hikari, are those your friends?" I heard a gentle voice ask.

I turned around to see a tall man. He was handsome, with clean-cut features and—accentuated by the suit he was wearing—gave off an intellectual impression.

"Good evening. I'm Hikari's father, Hoshimiya Sei. Hello, Yuino-chan, it's been quite some time since I've seen you," he greeted us pleasantly. As Hoshimiya's dad, he should've been relatively old, but he appeared very young. An amiable smile spread across his face, and I thought he looked like a very capable working adult.

Hold on... I feel like I've seen him before.

"Long time no see, Sei-san," Nanase said with a small bow.

Oh yeah, she did say she's known Hoshimiya's dad for a long time.

He turned his attention to me, so I hurriedly introduced myself and bowed as well. "Um, Hikari-san has helped me out a lot. I'm Haibara Natsuki."

Hoshimiya's dad, Sei-san, blinked at me in surprise. "Ah, I see. You're Natsuki-kun. Hikari talks about you a lot."

"Huh? Really?" I responded, astonished. *Hoshimiya talks about me at home?!*

"I've always wanted to meet you. This is perfect timing, so why don't we talk for a bit—"

"H-Hey! Stop that!" Cheeks flushed, Hoshimiya tugged on Sei-san's sleeve to end the conversation.

"Why, Hikari? I'm just a tad curious—"

She pushed her dad from behind, forcing him away from us. "W-Well then, you two! Let's hang out later! I'm heading home now!"

It's rare for Hoshimiya to be so agitated. It feels kinda new.

"Y-Yeah... See you," I said.

But then Sei-san stopped walking. Puzzled, Hoshimiya tilted her head to the side and looked up at him, still trying to shepherd him away.

"That's right. There's something I want to confirm," Sei-san said and turned around. Hoshimiya had only been able to move him because he hadn't felt like struggling. As expected, the strength of an adult man was on a different level. If he wanted to continue the conversation, then Hoshimiya had no way of stopping him. "Hikari told me she wanted to go on a trip. Yuino-chan, you're going too, right?"

Nanase assented with a nod. "Yes, that's right."

"Of course. I don't have any qualms with that, but..." Sei-san trained his gaze onto me. My first impression after meeting him was that he seemed like a kind person, so I had forgotten that he was the same strict father who set Hoshimiya's curfew and other rules...and I'd just remembered this fact now. "Are you going as well?"

Unprepared, I couldn't answer the question immediately, and the reason behind my hesitation was clear as day. I knew I had no choice left, so I timidly said, "Yes. I am." *Is there a problem? I wasn't told anything otherwise. Did Hoshimiya not tell him that there'd be boys on the trip?*

“Just as I suspected,” Sei-san said in a low, matter-of-fact tone. Hoshimiya and Nanase were both looking down in silence. The genial atmosphere from moments ago had frozen over in the blink of an eye. “Hikari.”

“Yes?” she replied reluctantly.

“Lying is not a good habit. You told me there would only be girls going with you.”

“If I told you there would be boys too, I knew you wouldn’t give me permission,” Hoshimiya countered with defiant eyes.

“Hmm. Well, I knew you’d think like that.” Sei-san ran his gaze over Hoshimiya and then to me.

I felt intimidated from the way he examined me; the pressure he gave off was a blaring reminder that he was an adult. The way he reviewed me like he was evaluating a product filled me with a sense of *déjà vu*. Then, it suddenly came back to me. *I do know this man! I’ve even spoken to him before.* “Are you Star Flat Corporation’s...president?”

Sei-san blinked at me in surprise. “I’m astonished you know of me... Though, to be more precise, I am the vice president.”

Yep. Thought so!

He was still the vice president because I was seven years in the past. But seven years in the future, Hoshimiya Sei would become the president. And in that future, Star Flat Corp. would be my first choice during my job hunt. That was why I recognized him. I had spoken to him once during my final interview. I’d also seen his face and profile on the company website. At the time, I’d noticed he shared the same family name as Hoshimiya, but it had never even occurred to me that he might be her father.

In seven years, Star Flat Corp. would be a top-ranked company with a workforce of thousands. It was currently just a midsize corporation, but it would expand at a tremendous rate soon. To describe what they did in simple terms, they made machinery. Their work coincided with the research I’d done in college, and the salary and benefits they offered were excellent, so my first choice had been to work with them in design and development.

Though I'd blazed through their first, second, and third screenings, the final screening was an interview with the president. I hadn't been able to speak well, and I'd received a rejection email in the end. Afterwards, I subsequently failed around thirty other job applications. *I've got a bit of a grudge against the president because of that. It's definitely not unjustified resentment!*

"Did you see our company's website?" he asked.

"Yes, you might say that. I'm a little interested in your company's field." *Why am I stiffening up? Calm down, me. I'm not in a job interview right now.*

"Oh, really? You're already thinking about the future at your age? Quite the promising student. I heard from Hikari that your grades are excellent as well. I hope you join us after graduating college. We'll welcome you with open arms."

Uh, sure, but you were the one who rejected me, though? Please don't trigger my trauma. "Well... Yes. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to change the topic," I replied with a conflicted expression.

"No, I apologize. Here I am trying to recruit you out of the blue. When it comes to work, I tend to get carried away." Sei-san awkwardly cleared his throat. "Setting that aside, let's return to the main topic."

The mood around us was now strange. Sei-san had practically ordered for the atmosphere to change.

"I'm terribly sorry to you and your friends, but Hikari will not be allowed to go with you on your trip."

Hoshimiya had been quietly watching us until now. Her face crumpled, and her small body began to tremble. *Welp, I saw this coming.* "Is that because I'm going to be there?"

"As Hikari said, I would never permit her to go on a trip where boys were present. But that is not the main issue at hand. I already said this, but lying is a bad thing," Sei-san stated impassively as he regarded his daughter with cold eyes.

Everything coming out of his mouth was a fair argument. There was no room for objection.

“It would only breed trouble if you thought lying to me could go unpunished.”

This was another family’s business to begin with. I had no right to intrude. So I couldn’t slip in a single word.

“I’m sure it’ll inconvenience the rest of you, but cancel Hikari’s portion of the trip.” Sei-san lowered his head to us in a formal manner, turned around, and left.

I locked eyes with Hoshimiya, who was standing frozen in place. She looked helpless, as if she’d burst into tears at any moment. “Are you okay with that?” I asked without thinking.

Hoshimiya started to say something in a quivering voice. “I...”

But her father interrupted her. “Hikari, let’s go.”

Hoshimiya’s body jolted with a start, and she followed Sei-san with her head down. She didn’t look back even once.

Nanase and I went to a hamburger steak restaurant inside the shopping mall. After I told my mom that I would be eating out, I took my seat across from Nanase. It was supposed to be a wonderful dinner with just the two of us, but the mood was awfully bleak. Nanase’s expression remained sullen the whole time.

This situation has turned into a huge mess. Hoshimiya is probably getting told off by Sei-san right about now. If I could’ve instantly reacted to his question with a lie, then there wouldn’t have been a problem.

“It’s not your fault,” Nanase said as if she’d seen right through my thoughts. “It’s unreasonable to expect you to have lied when you didn’t know anything.”

“Nanase, did you know?” I asked.

“I’m sorry.” She gave a small nod and then lowered her head. “Hikari asked me for advice on what to do. I’m the one who proposed she lie since it was the only option.”

And because of that, you feel responsible. You look so down in the dumps.
“I’ve got a better picture of what happened now.”

“I... I didn’t think he’d ever permit her to stay overnight somewhere with boys.”

“Nanase, you’re close to Hoshimiya’s dad, right?”

“I’ve been relatively close to him for a long time now. I’ve been to Hikari’s house a few times too. I was permitted to visit, but that’s because he also dictated who Hikari was friends with. He used to talk to me often.”

He even chose his daughter’s friends, huh? Knowing him, he’d do it without batting an eye. I still clearly remembered my final interview like it had happened just moments ago.

“I see you have a clear idea of what you wish to accomplish.”

“Yes! I would like to leverage the research I did in college for your company and—”

“In that case, you may not be suitable for us.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t want you to think that you can do whatever you please here. Provided you do join us, I will decide what you do. I won’t even ask for your opinion. Do you understand? I have no need for pawns that have a will of their own.”

I remember being shocked by his words. From Hoshimiya Sei’s attitude alone, he seemed like a gentle and friendly man, but the more you spoke to him, the more his stubborn personality shone through. He basically never changed his opinions, and he thought of other people as his own little pieces to use in a game of chess.

Hoshimiya was no exception—I could tell her freedom was restricted greatly. Her curfew always sat on my mind, and I’d heard that she had a rigorous upbringing.

“It’s a tough problem. And it’s not like he said anything *wrong* today,” I remarked.

“Yes... I understand what he’s worried about too,” Nanase replied. Then she added in a scathing tone, “If you could even call that being worried.”

“Well... What else can we do? I want Hoshimiya to come with us too, but

since he said all that, I feel like we can't push the subject. And even if we think of a different plan... It'll be hard to change plans since we've already reserved the cottage and everyone cleared those two days out."

It'd be great if Hoshimiya could come. I want to play on the beach with her. But realistically, we'll have to make a different opportunity to hang out with her. Even though I don't want to let things end like this, a part of me is staying levelheaded. If I were the same person from seven years ago, I might've tried to persuade Sei-san directly and charged in headfirst. But I won't act recklessly now. Perhaps it's a bit unfortunate, but I'm more of an adult than I was back then.

"But Hikari said...that she wanted to come." Words slowly began to spill out of Nanase, her head still hanging. "Even though her dad said no, I still want to go with her..."

Looks like Nanase's taking this much harder than I am.

"It's the first time Hikari has ever wanted to go somewhere so badly. Usually she would just give up at her dad's direction, but she said she wanted to go no matter what this time," Nanase continued.

"So she's never rebelled against her father?"

"She did before in the past, but it was a pointless struggle...so she gave up midway. She said it was futile to rebel against him anyway, so she became obedient to her parents."

Honestly... I can't imagine my world being like that. My mom and dad are kind, and I had everything I needed during my upbringing. If I did anything bad, I would certainly be scolded accordingly. But my parents always respected my will.

"Hikari wanted to go, even knowing what her parents are like, so I wanted her wish to come true."

And that's why you decided lying would be the best option since Hoshimiya can't openly rebel against Sei-san. I pointed at the hamburger steak meal set in front of Nanase and said, "Your food's getting cold." I'd started eating long ago. *I'm sad, but I can't live if I don't eat.*

Nanase slowly began to pick at her food. She was considerably crestfallen. It was obvious just looking at her, but sadly, I didn't know what to say that would cheer her up. I had no experience consoling a depressed girl, and I didn't have a solution to the larger issue either. At the very least, regarding today's encounter, Sei-san had been in the right. If we did anything based solely on our feelings, we would just be children throwing a tantrum.

"I first began talking to Hikari around our third year of elementary school," Nanase said, the words coming out slowly as if she was reminiscing about something from long ago.

"I knew you two went to the same middle school, but you guys were in the same elementary school too?"

"Yes. Hikari didn't want to talk about her time in elementary school, so we kept quiet about it."

Come to think of it, I haven't heard Hoshimiya and Nanase talk much about the past. "She didn't want to talk about it? Why?"

"Haibara-kun, you didn't talk about your middle school days until we found out about your high school debut, right?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. And I still don't really like talking about it... I don't even want to remember those days..." *And besides, middle school was over seven years ago for me, so I simply don't recall the details.*

"The reason Hikari doesn't want to talk about her past is virtually the same as yours."

"Are you saying she also went through a high school glow up? It doesn't seem that way, though."

"In her case, she was pretty much the way she is now back in middle school. She was the cutest girl in school—cheerful and bright like an idol. That was her, Hoshimiya Hikari. But she wasn't like that in elementary school," Nanase said and tacked on, "I shouldn't be telling you all of this, but when I first spoke to her, she didn't have a single friend."

I found Nanase's tale unbelievable. If she hadn't been recounting all this to me herself, I wouldn't have believed it.

“She was plain, meek, and always morose-looking. She was bad at talking, and she constantly stayed by herself, huddled up in a corner of the classroom, reading a book. We were in the same class all throughout elementary school, but I practically never spoke to her until our third year. Partly because I used to be a bit more spirited than I am now, so I was the center of our class.”

The two had grown close due to a coincidental encounter at the library: Hoshimiya had been reading a book that Nanase enjoyed, so Nanase had decided to reach out to her.

“Isn’t that book good?” she’d asked.

Hoshimiya had jumped with a start, but with her shoulders shaking, she’d replied, *“You’ve read this?”*

Nanase nodded, and Hoshimiya started talking about it unprompted. She was clumsy and stuttered here and there, but she frenetically tried to convey what was interesting and wonderful about the book, as well as what resonated with her heart. Finding Hoshimiya’s gushing adorable, Nanase became curious about her. From then on, Nanase began going to the library more, and Hoshimiya gradually became attached to her.

For Nanase, Hoshimiya was another name to add to her list of friends. For Hoshimiya, Nanase was her only friend. And as they played together more and more, they had become each other’s one and only best friend.

“But the more time I spent with her, the more I understood how much Hikari was bound by her parents.”

“I’m sorry. My parents said I can’t play with my friends for a while.”

“They told me I have to study after school until I rank first on our tests.”

“I’m happy for the invite, but they said I can’t play games.”

“I’m not allowed to talk to boys unless necessary, so I can’t be friends with him.”

“Then one day, Hikari invited me to her home.”

Nanase had thought it unusual, but she didn’t brood over it and went to Hikari’s house. Although it wasn’t a luxurious mansion, her house was a large

and spacious single-family home. Sometime while the two of them were hanging out, Sei-san also joined in for some reason.

“At the time, I thought it strange, but now I understand why. He was testing me. He was there to see if I was worthy of being Hikari’s friend. When I recall the way he looked at me like he was evaluating a product, I still feel uncomfortable.”

After a brief conversation with Nanase, Sei-san had said this to Hoshimiya: *“Hikari. You should be more like this girl. What are you saying? It’s not difficult. You’re my child, after all. You will be diligent and systematic: a bright, cheerful, and amiable girl.”*

“Hikari changed at school after that.”

Little by little, bit by bit, Hoshimiya’s personality had transformed. She cut her long bangs that veiled her face, and her expression turned gentle. She stopped stuttering when she talked, spoke louder, and became able to initiate conversations on her own. Before she knew it, she had more friends than Nanase, and she stood at the center of their class, the spotlight even brighter on her than it had been on Nanase.

“I don’t think the current Hikari is a facade of lies. She simply used to be different. If she tried to revert back to her old personality, I’m sure she’d find that much harder.”

I’ve never thought that Hoshimiya was acting...though, there were moments where I felt like her reactions were robotic.

“She’s probably much better at hiding her emotions than we think... And she’s probably got a lot more on her mind and is suffering much more than we realize too. That’s why I wanted to help her, even if only a little bit.” Nanase stopped eating and finally looked up at me. “Say, Haibara-kun.”

I was captivated by her clear eyes.

“Do you...like Hikari?”

It didn’t occur to me to ask her to clarify what she’d meant by that. After all, no matter what her implication, my answer was obvious. “Of course. I like her a lot.”

Nanase looked at me with a forlorn smile. She took out a notepad and a pen from her bag and scribbled something down on a page. When she finished writing, she handed the piece of paper to me. “Please be there for her.”



Written in neat handwriting was the address of a café in Takasaki.

“I’m sure that you’ll be much more helpful than me.”

I didn’t know what meaning lurked behind her words, but I gave her a firm nod. I wanted to allay even the smallest amount of unease from Nanase’s heart. That was all I could do right now.

The next day, I went to the café that Nanase had pointed me to with the note. It was an inconspicuous shop located on a secluded backstreet quite far from Takasaki Station. *Does this place even get customers? Not gonna lie, I don’t really want to go in. It looks like the kinda place that’d reject first-time customers. Still, I’ve come this far already, so I’m not turning back now!*

I opened the door, and a soft chime rang. Contrary to the café’s desolate exterior, the inside of the store had a stylish ambience. The interior looked old, but it was beautifully maintained.

“Welcome. Take a seat where you like,” came a simple greeting from a middle-aged shopkeeper who hadn’t even looked my way.

The café gave off a feeling of being privately owned, which was comforting. The store was almost empty, with only two tables of customers: an elderly married couple chatting happily in seats by the entrance and a girl wearing glasses, working on her laptop, situated deeper within the store by the window.

I walked in and headed to the window seating. The bespectacled girl was deeply engrossed in her work, so even when I stood right next to her, she didn’t notice me and continued hammering away on her keyboard.

“Hoshimiya,” I called out to her.

She stopped suddenly and stiffly turned my way like a creaking robot. “N-Natsuki-kun?!” she shouted with a tempestuous voice inside the quiet shop.

“Shhh,” I whispered with my pointer finger to my lips. Hoshimiya covered her mouth in a panic. The elderly couple was peering our way curiously. I bowed at them apologetically and then took a seat across from Hoshimiya. She was still

flustered by my unexpected appearance, so I called the shopkeeper over and ordered a coffee.

Hoshimiya opened her mouth when the shopkeeper had returned behind the counter. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Why are you here?”

You’re way too shaken by this; your eyes are swimming in circles. And here I thought you’d pulled yourself together a little while I was ordering. “Nanase told me about this place and asked me to drop by.”

“I... I didn’t hear anything about that from her!”

“I can tell from your reaction.” Hoshimiya’s got a different vibe today. She’s wearing big, black-rimmed glasses, and her hair’s tied behind her back. I would never see her like this in school. It’s like she’s relaxed. You know, off duty from school and socializing. It’s a fresh look and also very cute!

“Jeez... Yuino-chan, you...” She shot a displeased scowl out the window.

Drawn by her gaze, I also turned my attention outside. The sky was a perfectly clear expanse of blue, and we could hear the chirping cicadas through the window. It was another day of midsummer heat. Thankfully, the café’s air conditioner was functioning.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” she said. The words trickled out of her slowly. “And now I can’t go see the ocean anymore.”

“Right... It’s unfortunate, but you can’t do much about it,” I replied.

“I’m really sorry. I’m the one who wanted to go to the beach too.” Her gloomy expression changed to a faint smile. “Have fun with everyone. Don’t worry about me.”

What should I say in response? While I fumbled for the right words to say, the shopkeeper brought my coffee. Seeking a reason to stay silent, I brought the cup to my lips. The bitter taste of black coffee calmed me. A hot brew in an air-conditioned store was truly divine.

“Are you writing a novel?” The words I’d strung together ended up as a question to change the subject. But it was something that had caught my eye. When Hoshimiya had been so absorbed in her work that she hadn’t noticed me,

I'd seen a word processor pulled up on her computer screen.

"F-Figures... So you noticed?" She regarded me with a troubled smile.

I guess she didn't want anyone to know? Well, I didn't find out until today, so obviously she was hiding it from us. "I saw your screen. Sorry, I shouldn't have looked without asking."

Hoshimiya appeared embarrassed. After a moment, she said, "I was keeping it a secret."

Is it such a big deal that she'd need to hide it? Even after finding out that Hoshimiya is writing a novel, I know she's in the literature club, so it doesn't feel out of character. Plus, I was already aware she's a big reading otaku. Besides...

Nanase's story from yesterday flashed into my head. *"She was plain, meek, and always morose-looking. She was bad at talking, and she constantly stayed by herself, huddled up in a corner of the classroom, reading a book. We were in the same class all throughout elementary school, but I practically never spoke to her until our third year. Partly because I used to be a bit more spirited than I am now, so I was the center of our class."*

When I'd first heard that, I couldn't imagine what Hoshimiya was like in the past. But now that I'd seen her in this plain form, there was a realistic weight behind Nanase's words.

"Don't tell everyone else, okay?"

"Sure, but why are you hiding it?"

"Well... It's embarrassing. I wouldn't like it if someone asked me to show them... Plus, writing novels isn't a popular hobby. I don't want people to think I'm weird."

Well, it's not hard to understand why she'd feel that way. I'm not biased since I'm an otaku at heart, but people who don't get these sorts of hobbies might change their opinions of Hoshimiya. The five of us know that she loves novels and that she's actually pretty nerdy, but the rest of the class and school probably don't.

Hoshimiya is bright, kind to everyone, and the school's cutest girl—she's like a

charming idol. I bet the majority of people perceive her that way. And she does tend to respond to anyone she's not close to in a superficial way.

"I get it. I won't tell anyone. Was Nanase the only one who knew?"

"Yeah. Yuino-chan has been reading my stuff for a while now."

"I see... When did you start writing novels?"

"In elementary school. I was addicted to the world of literature, and I wanted to try writing my own. I thought if I could depict the world inside my head, I could surely create something interesting."

The classic thought process of a production-type otaku! By the way, I'm a consumption-type otaku, so I'm satisfied just by consuming other people's work. I've never considered creating something myself, which is why I respect otaku who want to create their own work. After all, consumption-type otaku like me couldn't live if production-type otaku didn't exist.

"Then you've been keeping this up for a long time already?"

"Yeah. I'm not getting much better at writing, though." Hoshimiya let out a dry, self-deprecating laugh. Her vision fell to the laptop screen in front of her.

"What kind of novel are you writing?" I asked but then quickly added, "Or should I not ask too much about it?" *She may talk to Nanase about it, but it's possible she doesn't want to talk to me about it. I'm honestly curious about her novel, but it's probably better I don't dig too deep.*

Worried thoughts flew through my mind, but she shook her head. "No, it's fine. I don't mind since it's you. I'm guessing Yuino-chan led you here with those intentions."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She probably wanted to tell me, 'have Natsuki-kun help you instead of me.'"

Unable to grasp the gist of Hoshimiya's words, I cocked my head in puzzlement. *Help? Help with what?*

Seeing my confusion made her expression soften somehow. "Originally, Yuino-chan would read my novels and give me advice," she explained. "To make my stories even more interesting."

“And...she wants me to take over now?” I deduced. Hoshimiya nodded. “Uh, but why me?” *I’m just your average otaku, and obviously I’ve never written a novel.*

“Natsuki-kun, you share my interest in stories, and you read a lot of books too, right?”

“Well, I try to...”

“And when we discuss novels together, I’ve noticed that you have a very analytical eye. I’ve found your opinions really helpful. I told Yuino-chan about that aspect of you...so I think that’s why.”

I’m happy to be complimented, but I’m not sure if that’s actually true. Well, I am the type of otaku to drop lengthy musings about anime and manga on Twister and various blogs, so maybe I am proficient at putting my thoughts into words... Though it definitely doesn’t feel that way!

“Of course, only if you don’t find it annoying,” Hoshimiya said apologetically. She was still hanging her head, but she glanced at me with upturned eyes.

Aren’t you too crafty? I used to think she was a natural airhead, but after talking to Nanase, I’m starting to suspect otherwise. Her adorable expression wasn’t enough to defeat me. Of course I wouldn’t lose to it! But I wanted to give Hoshimiya peace of mind as soon as possible, so I accepted her request with a deliberately upbeat tone.

“Of course I don’t find it annoying! I’m very down! I’m curious about your novel, and I purely enjoy reading... And I want to do everything I can when a friend asks me for help!”

“Do you mean it? Thanks! You really are kind, Natsuki-kun.”

“But I don’t know if I’ll actually be helpful.” My half-hearted commitment was, in the end, because I lacked confidence in my own abilities. I had never given my opinion directly to the actual creator of a story before.

“If you give me your honest impressions, that’ll be plenty. The revisions are for me to think about,” she said and then rummaged through her bag next to her. Before long, she was handing me a thick stack of papers. It was her novel in printed form. “It’s more or less complete...but I’m concerned about the plot

development.”

Written at the top was the title: *A Tale of the Summer Sea (Temp.)*. She was likely still mulling over just what to call it. I read through the opening scene. It didn’t feel awkward to read—the sentences were well crafted and easy to digest. The whole thing seemed on par with professional writing. *Wow, Hoshimiya wrote this?!*

“Can I read it here?” I asked.

“Um, sure... But that *is* a whole book’s worth of words, you know?” she replied with uncertainty.

“I’m a pretty fast reader. We’re both here, so I figured it’d be nice if I could give you feedback today.” *Also, this café is cozy and good for reading. It’s not just because I want to spend more time with Hoshimiya. No way! Of course not!*

“Okay, then... In that case, I’ll work on something else while I wait.”

Though she’d said that, she kept glancing in my direction. It was a bit distracting at first, but as my eyes traced the text, I quickly became immersed in the story.

The story began when a boy and a girl met by the water’s edge. The genre was young adult mystery, and it was set at a high school by the sea. A smart girl and a boy of action worked together to solve trifling day-to-day mysteries. It read like a light novel, and the dialogue was also quite humorous. There were a few places where it was difficult to understand the methods behind some of the cases, or the solution came too easily, but the story was so compelling that I continued reading nonstop.

In the end, the girl fell in love with the boy. She was clever, but experiencing her first love made her panic. She agonized over how to approach the boy and eventually confessed her feelings. But the boy was hiding a secret from his past...

“So that’s what it was,” I murmured as the story came to an end and I returned to reality.

I lifted my head from the stack of papers to see Hoshimiya concentrating on me. When our eyes met, her shoulders jumped, and she turned away. She

started doing a shoddy job at whistling nonchalantly, but it was far too late to pretend like she hadn't been staring at me. Not that she could even whistle.

I ignored Hoshimiya's terrible wind-blowing noises and stretched my neck, massaging my shoulders. Sitting still for an extended period of time had left me feeling quite sore. I checked the clock; two hours had flown by before I even knew it. I ordered an iced tea to quench the thirst that had built up, as well as to pay the fee for staying in the café so long.

"H-How was it?" she asked timidly.

"It was good. Hoshimiya, you're amazing," I said honestly.

"Really?" She broke out into a bright smile.

Not gonna lie, this was way more interesting than I thought it would be. I guess I underestimated her a bit. I never imagined she could write such a riveting story.

"Natsuki-kun, your praise makes me super happy!"

After giving my preliminary impressions, I jumped to the first question I had thought of once I'd finished reading. "Is the reason you wanted to go to the beach because of this story?"

A Tale of the Summer Sea—it was only a provisional title, but those words held enough importance to the story for her to use them as the title. Looking torn, Hoshimiya shook her head.

"I can't say for sure, but I don't think so. I simply wanted to go to the beach... I love the ocean enough that I wrote this story." She peered out the window with a lonely gaze and rested her chin on her hand. "Playing around at the beach with everyone sounds like it'd be a lot of fun."

When I saw that expression, I knew I had messed up. I'd asked out of pure curiosity, but it was obviously a sore spot for Hoshimiya. After all, I had brought up a trip that she couldn't go on.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have asked," I said.

"Oh, um, sorry. That was a weird way to answer. I'm fine; it doesn't bother me at all. It's only natural you'd think that after reading this draft. I'm sure if I

went with you guys, I'd be thinking about how to apply the experience to my story," she said hurriedly. Clearly, she hadn't meant to make me feel bad for asking.

We both sank into quiet introspection. The shopkeeper walked over to our table, as if having waited for precisely this moment, carefully placed my iced tea down, and left.

"S-So... What'd you think?" Hoshimiya asked shyly. "I'd like to hear any specific thoughts you have."

"Right. The writing was really good. It was easy to read, and the images just flowed into my head. I like both of the main characters, and the mystery part is great too...but the last part of the book doesn't quite sit right with me."

"Thought so... You picked up on it too?" She sounded as if she were already aware of what the problem I'd found was.

I nodded. "Yeah. It was supposed to be about romance, but it felt more like a story about chasing after the boy's past."

How do I put this...? The story lost its sense of realism out of nowhere, and the boy's personality changed suddenly, which threw me for a loop. The resolution to the problem at the end also felt forced. I tried to word my opinions in a gentle manner so I wouldn't sound too harsh.

Hoshimiya nodded. "That's the part I've been worrying about too." She dropped her vision to her computer screen and pondered for a while.

Should I give more of my opinions now? There are a bunch of things I want to ask and say, but am I supposed to tell her? How much feedback does Hoshimiya want from me? Depending on what her goal is, the comments I should give her will change. Ultimately, I decided it'd be best to clarify. "Hey, Hoshimiya, can I ask something? What are you planning to do with your novel?"

"What am I planning? What do you mean?" She looked at me blankly.

I began listing off various examples as I counted them with my fingers. "Like, did you write this to satisfy yourself? Or did you want someone else to read it and enjoy it? Or maybe you want to enter it into a competition to win a prize. Do you want to be a professional writer? My opinions differ depending on what

you're striving for."

Honestly, this novel is plenty good for amateur writing. There's tons here to praise. If I had read this and someone told me a high schooler like me wrote it, I'd be blown out of the water... Well, if you can even call me a high schooler, but let's ignore that for now.

Hoshimiya flipped through the novel, thinking hard. "All of the above, I think," she said, tone intense. She looked up from the pages and regarded me with a serious expression. She didn't wear the warm, gentle smile that I'd come to know—she almost seemed like a different person entirely.

"I want to create something I'm satisfied with. Something that will satisfy you and Yuino-chan...and all the people who'll read it. If I can write something like that, then I can win a prize." Her words were a declaration, one that sounded as if she were trying to convince herself. "And one day, I want to be an author."

I felt a powerful determination coming from her. And yet, I could tell this was something she had been ruminating over for a long time. As of late, and especially right before summer vacation began, Hoshimiya had seemed strangely insecure. She would smile cheerfully, but suddenly a dark expression would take over... Her feelings were turbulent and shifted frequently.

"Of course I'm rooting for you, and I want to help you if you're cool with it." *I don't think anything will change if I point out her instability. I need to choose my words carefully. I want to help my friends fulfill their dreams by any means... And I'm glad that Hoshimiya has opened up to me about her secret that she's been keeping from everyone else.*

"I've never put how I felt into words before. Gosh, my heart's pounding," she said, hand on her chest to calm herself. "That's right. I want to become an author. So I want to hear all your thoughts, Natsuki-kun."

"Got it! Then I'll point out the parts that bothered me. First, from the beginning..." I started listing all of the things I could think of one by one as Hoshimiya took notes. Then, we'd both brainstorm ways to fix the issue, and once we were in agreement, we'd move on to the next item. "I think this part needs more explanation. I didn't quite understand what happened."

"Hmm... The other explanations are long, so I wanted to cut down on that

one. What should I do?”

“Maybe one of the characters could explain it instead of having it be exposition? I think it’ll be easier to understand that way, as opposed to using narration.”

“Oh, I see! That’s a good idea. Then...”

We bounced ideas off of each other over and over. It was fun! There was a gratifying enjoyment that came from working on something genuinely and seriously. Seeing Hoshimiya earnestly contemplate how to improve her story sparked something inside of me.

“Then, for this part... I can do this...” she mumbled as she stared at her screen.

When we reached a stopping point, I looked out the window. The sky had already turned a dark crimson. I’d finished off my tea already, but the ice had melted, leaving behind a little pool of water.

“Yikes,” I said when I saw the time. “It’s this late already?”

“Huh?” Hoshimiya tilted her head and looked down at her watch. Her mouth went wide, and she let out a little yelp. “S-Sorry, Natsuki-kun! I—”

“Your curfew? Sorry, I didn’t think we’d stay this long.”

“Yeah! I just got in trouble because of the trip, and now I’m going to get scolded again!” Her face paled.

Sei-san is very scary, I feel. “Don’t worry about me; you’d better get going.”

“Right. Um, I’m really sorry. You’re helping me...and now I’m ditching you.”

“Don’t sweat it. It’s summer vacation, so I’ve got free time to spare. Invite me out anytime,” I said from the bottom of my heart.

Hoshimiya packed her things in a frenzied panic and then grabbed my hands. *Wait... She grabbed my hands? Huh? Hmm? Why is Hoshimiya holding my right hand with both of hers?*

“Natsuki-kun, thanks for today. It made me really happy,” she said, her face at point-blank range. At such close proximity, her beauty was all the more

apparent. Her porcelain white skin was devoid of any blemishes, and I could see myself reflected in her large, bright eyes. “I’m going to work hard.”

With that, she said goodbye to the shopkeeper and ran out of the store. The owner wordlessly bade her farewell. *You can tell that Hoshimiya frequents this place a lot. They look like they’re very friendly with each other... Incidentally, Hoshimiya, what about your bill?!*

That same night after I got home, Hoshimiya called me.

“Hello, hello. How’s it going?” I greeted her lightheartedly. However, she didn’t say anything back. “Hoshimiya? Can you hear me?”

She responded to her name, but her tone sounded much gloomier than usual. “Yeah, I can. Natsuki-kun, sorry about today. I forgot to pay the bill.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve got a job, so let me treat you every once in a while.”

“No. I’ll pay you back. Besides, you’re helping me with my novel, so I should be the one treating *you* to drinks. I’m so sorry... I was in such a rush that I forgot.”

“If you’re going to torment yourself that much, then you can pay me back for your stuff, but I’m gonna pay for mine. And anyway, I barged in on your secret spot in the first place, so seriously, don’t let it eat at you.”

We argued back and forth until we finally agreed that Hoshimiya would only pay me back for her portion.

“Okay, then you can get it back to me next—” I began.

“No. Can I give it to you now?” she asked.

“Right now?” I checked the clock in my room. It was already past 10 p.m. *There’s no way Hoshimiya can go outside right now. It’s way past her curfew.*

“This is the closest station to your place, right?”

As she said that, I received a message from her. It was a picture of my town’s station sign. The sky was dark—it had been taken at night. I doubted Hoshimiya

had ever come to such a backwater, empty train station before. The fact that she had sent me a picture instead of just saying the name meant she was there right now.

“I ran away from home. So I don’t have a curfew anymore,” Hoshimiya stated matter-of-factly.

My brain stopped working. *Wh-What am I supposed to do here?! C-C-C-Calm down, Haibara Natsuki! I can ask her about what happened later. It’s dangerous for Hoshimiya to be alone in the middle of nowhere at an empty train station at night. I should meet up with her first and then hear what she has to say.*

“W-Wait right there for me!” I yelled and then hurtled out the door without hanging up the phone.

The nights were cool, but sweating was a matter of course when running was involved. I arrived at my town’s station dripping with sweat. Maybe I hadn’t needed to rush this much, but I was so flustered that walking wasn’t an option. We were in the sticks, but thankfully there was still one streetlight lit.

I found Hoshimiya sitting on the stone stairs. Her expression was bleak, but I was relieved to see her safe. She stood up when she saw me approaching.

After a moment, she said, “Natsuki-kun, I’m sorry for coming without asking first.”

“Nah, it’s fine...but were you serious about running away from home?” I replied.

“Yeah. Papa and I had a bit of a spat. I couldn’t stand being there anymore, so I ran away.” Hoshimiya laughed sheepishly. She was clearly forcing herself to smile. “Anyway, here’s what I owe you.” She held out a one thousand yen bill, and I took it.

“You...came all the way here just for this?” I questioned.

“If... If I say yes, will you believe me?”

“I can pretend I do.”

“Sorry... I’m lying. I actually came here because I wanted to see you. I’m terrible for using my own mistake as an excuse to be here. I’m really sorry... I’m hopeless... No matter what I do, it’s always like this.”

Hoshimiya’s head is not in a good place right now. I don’t think it’ll go well if I tell her she should go home. I should stay with her right now. Once she’s calmed down, I’ll listen to her, and we can think of a solution together. But we can’t hang around the station late at night either.

“Don’t worry, Hoshimiya. It’s all good,” I assured her. *But what should we do? It’s almost time for the last train. If she’s going to take the train home, then she has to take the next one. But if she does get on, where will she go? She can’t go home.* “Do you want to come over to my house for now?”

That was the only option I could think of in my rural town. My mom was coincidentally staying with our grandma today, so she wasn’t home. Though, my little sister would be there. Hoshimiya looked at me apologetically, but after some hesitation, she nodded.

She’s probably got no one else to turn to. I’m curious as to why she didn’t rely on Nanase, though. As a guy, I’d be over the moon if she chose me over Nanase, but realistically speaking, I bet that’s not what happened.

We walked side by side in silence down the summer night road, Hoshimiya following me as I led the way to my home. *This situation is like something out of a dream, but I can’t feel happy about the circumstances. I’m simply worried about Hoshimiya. She’s kept her head down this whole time. It doesn’t look like she’s decided what to do next—she’s not thinking straight.*

And there’s another problem... It’s easy for her to say she ran away, but she’s a girl, and it’s nighttime. I wouldn’t be surprised if the police got involved. It’s honestly risky for me to invite her to my house in this situation.

“Hoshimiya, um...” I began carefully.

Sensing the hesitation in my voice, she spoke up. “I don’t think he’ll report this to the police,” she said. “If he did, it’d affect our family’s reputation negatively, after all.”

“I...see.”

“I’m sure he’s looking for me right now. He probably thought I went to Yuino-chan’s house, which is why he didn’t care that I left, but he should have figured out I’m not there, and he’s probably searching for me in a panic now.”

“Is that why you came to my place?”

“Yes, papa thinks Yuino-chan is the only person I can rely on, after all. I’m sorry for getting you wrapped up in all this. At first, I figured I’d run away on my own. I planned to ride the train until I got somewhere far away, but then I thought of you and I realized I didn’t pay for my drinks at the café, so I used that as a reason to come here, and now here I am depending on you.” Hoshimiya’s voice trembled as she spoke. She sounded like she might break out into tears at any moment.

“It’s fine. Please, depend on me. Friends help each other out when they’re in a bind.” *Well, that sounded corny, but I really meant it. Besides, I don’t think the fault lies with Hoshimiya. I think Sei-san is the real cause here. Though, I won’t know for sure until I hear the details.*

“It’s...scary.” Hoshimiya held her quivering arms as she walked. “It’s been a long time since I tried to rebel against papa.”

“Hoshimiya...”

“When I was younger, every time I disobeyed papa, he’d harshly reprimand me. Since then, I started living the way he told me to. You know... I’ve always been his little puppet.”

I’ve never seen her family dynamic, but somehow I can imagine. I got that impression based on how Hoshimiya and Sei-san interacted at the mall.

“Natsuki-kun, you saw, right? The kind of person he is.”

“Yeah,” I said after a beat. *I know what kind of person he is a lot more than you might expect. He’s definitely not the type of guy that’d respect what his daughter wants.*

“I’ve been acting as his ideal daughter my whole life. There was no point in defying him. I didn’t do anything he disliked, I gave up on the things I wanted,

and I became someone he liked.” Hoshimiya moved up past me and continued talking as she peered up at the sky. “Did you know that I used to be a dreary, meek, and plain girl?”

She spun around and smiled brightly at me. “He hated the old me, so I stopped acting like that. I became cheerful, energetic, and cute—a popular girl who smiles at anyone and everyone at school... And that’s who I am now.”

I knew she was putting up a front, but her smile was no different from her usual one.

She suddenly erased all the emotion from her visage. “Maybe it’s because I’ve been writing since I was young. I didn’t find it hard to act as the personalities I’d created. I couldn’t do well when it came to my studies or sports, no matter how hard I tried, but once my personality and appearance were to my papa’s liking, he stopped getting mad at me.”

I’d heard this story from Nanase already, but the gravity of the situation felt heavier hearing it come from Hoshimiya herself. The girl standing before me was a Hoshimiya Hikari that I didn’t even know.

“Hey, Natsuki-kun... Aren’t I cute?” She stood in front of me with a faint smile.

I stopped walking and nodded.

“I worked hard to become this cute. If I couldn’t be cute, then papa would despise me. I actually wanted to become someone beautiful and cool, but papa prefers me like this.”

Suddenly, memories of Hoshimiya flashed through my mind.

“Ah ha ha, just kidding! I like androgynous fashion myself. I’ll buy men’s clothing too if it catches my fancy. I’m happy you think I look cool!”

“But I do want people to think I’m beautiful, and I’m still working on that.”

“Well... It’s embarrassing. I wouldn’t like it if someone asked me to show them... Plus, writing novels isn’t a popular hobby. I don’t want people to think I’m weird.”

I’d felt that there was something inconsistent about her before. There was a disconnect in how she carried herself compared to her hobbies and

preferences. It wasn't major enough that it weighed on my mind. The discrepancy had only made me think that people just had those sorts of dissonances or gaps in their personalities. But after hearing her speak now, everything was falling into place, and I was finally understanding her.

"So, Natsuki-kun. Are you disappointed?"

I shook my head back and forth. "Of course not. To me, you'll always be Hoshimiya."

"Even if I only said all this because I calculated that's how you'd respond?"

"It's true that I don't know this side of Hoshimiya Hikari," I began. "But everyone has secrets or facets that they want to hide from others. Humans have a lot going on inside. I've got plenty too. I don't care if you have a bit more to hide than others."

I have sides that I don't want to show everyone else too. I've been exposed a little because of the Tatsuya incident, but obviously I'm still hiding more. And I haven't told anyone that I'm a time traveler from seven years in the future. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Laying everything out doesn't guarantee there'll be a positive outcome.

"Natsuki-kun..." Hoshimiya stood still, nonplussed.

I walked past her. "Let's go. We're almost to my house."

The streets were empty, but this wasn't the sort of conversation we should be having in the middle of a residential area. I was still lost as to how to handle the situation, and there were probably kinder words I could've offered her, but I chose to follow my heart. That's why though my words may have sounded cold, I didn't think I had made a mistake.

I opened the door when we got to my house. No one greeted me, which meant Namika was probably reading manga in the living room or something. *Perfect! We can get to my room before she notices.*

"Thanks for having me," Hoshimiya whispered nervously.

I lifted my finger to my lips, and the two of us quietly sneaked up to the

second floor. I led her to my room and gave her the chair to sit in. I took a seat on my bed. Hoshimiya curled up on the chair and restlessly surveyed the area.

“So this is what your room looks like.”

I'm glad I tidied up my room. I happened to do a huge summer cleanup recently because of my newly received vacation downtime.

“This is my first time in a boy's room. It's quite well-kept,” she commented.

“Y-Yeah, right? Mm-hmm. It is indeed well-kept.” I nodded too enthusiastically as the nerves started setting in. *It's late at night. I'm in my room...with the girl I love. Just the two of us!*

“Why're you talking like that?” Hoshimiya asked with a chortle.

My desk chair... Dresser, bed, bookshelf... Nice, they all look normal, I thought as I checked my room for any problematic items. *Maybe my bookshelf has too many books and manga, but that's about it.*

“Oh, this series is really interesting!” She picked out a light novel from my shelf and flipped through it. She may have been a mystery buff, but in the end, she was a bibliophile like me, who'd read anything. “It's fun perusing through other people's books. You can tell what they're into.”

“If you look too closely, I'm gonna get shy.”

Hoshimiya giggled. “Yep, you really are an otaku, Natsuki-kun. I knew you were one already, but it's starting to sink in. Oh, you have the complete set of *Shino's Journey*. This series was super good too!”

Hoshimiya looked like she was having the time of her life as she gleefully rummaged through my bookshelf. *I guess she's not thinking about anything else except for books. I need some more time to get used to her being in my room too. Let's take a moment to calm down...* Right as I thought that, the door to my room opened.

“Ah,” I uttered.

“Hey, onii-chan. Lend me the next volume of *Maruto*—” Namika strolled in with a super popular ninja manga tucked under her arm. She completely froze, blinking at Hoshimiya, who was standing in front of my bookshelf.

“G-Good evening?” Hoshimiya awkwardly bowed hello.

“Uh, um, yes... Er, good evening.” Namika’s mind was not totally with her, but she successfully managed to return the greeting. “W-Well, s-sorry for bothering you,” she mumbled, backing out of the room with the super popular ninja manga still tucked under her arm, and closed the door.

Hoshimiya and I looked at each other, and we both smiled wryly. *Welp, I knew it would be impossible to hide, and I did mean to explain to Namika... Now that I put it off, it’s going to be a pain to explain! But you gotta do what you gotta do.* I stood up.

Hoshimiya lowered her head apologetically. “Sorry for the bother.”

“It’s fine. She’ll get it if I explain.” I didn’t really believe that, but I wanted to reassure Hoshimiya regardless.

I went down to the living room, and Namika immediately grabbed me by the collar.

“Wh-Wh-Who was that?! Was that your girlfriend?!” she cried.

“No. Some stuff happened on her end, so I brought her over. She might stay the night,” I explained.

“Isn’t that even worse if she’s not your girlfriend?!”

“There’s a lot going on, okay? She’s my friend from school.”

“I never thought you’d ever bring a girl over...and one so *cute*!”

“Heeey? Are you listening?”

“What should I do? Should I call mom?”

“No, don’t... It’ll be a pain to explain. She’s not going to come home until tomorrow night, anyway.” Strictly speaking, I wanted to avoid my mom contacting Hoshimiya’s parents.

“O-Okay. Leave it to me, onii-chan!” Namika was getting giddy for reasons beyond me, and she gave me a thumbs-up.

Has she lost all her marbles?

“Um, should I sleep in the living room today?” she asked timidly.

It was an enigmatic question, and I furrowed my brows in confusion. But then, it hit me.



My sister and I slept on the second floor, and the living room was on the first floor.

“Cause...y’know...the noise and stuff,” Namika mumbled, red-faced.

I poked her head, hard. “I told you, she’s *not* my girlfriend!”

“Then...she’s just a casual partner?!”

“Cool it, dumbass. We’re not gonna do anything like that, so stop worrying.”

I patted Namika’s head, and she gradually calmed down. She gasped when she came back to her senses and swatted my hand away. “Gross!” she exclaimed, blushing.

If you hate it that much, your onii-chan will be sad...

“Hey, wait, isn’t she Hoshimiya Hikari-san?” Namika asked once she’d fully regained her composure.

I was surprised by her question. “You know her?”

“Oh, she really is! I’ve seen her on Minsta before. She’s famous for being the cutest girl at Ryomei. The boys in my class look at Hoshimiya-san’s Minsta all the time.”

I didn’t know Hoshimiya was that famous... Namika’s middle school is far away and has no connection to ours. Though, I know she has an impressive following, and her posts definitely do get a lot of likes.

“Wow, the real deal is super cute... Can I meet her again?” Namika asked bashfully.

“Go to sleep already,” I replied and went back upstairs.

When I returned to my room, Hoshimiya was zoning out at the ceiling. She sat on the carpet with her back against my bed.

“Did you persuade your little sister?” she asked.

“Yeah, I managed,” I replied and sat down next to her.

Silence descended upon the room, and the reality of the situation suddenly

dawned on me. *It's humid, so I'd better turn on the AC. I'm sticky with sweat because I ran to the station too. I need a bath...and not just me, Hoshimiya too. I tried not to think about it, but there's nowhere else for her to go at this time of night. Which means...Hoshimiya has to sleep here.*

"Are you gonna stay over?" I should've brought that up much earlier, but better late than never.

"Yeah," she said with a nod.

"Then you probably want to wash up, right? I'll go get a towel and a change of clothes for you."

"Oh, I have clothes with me. I was planning on staying at a hotel after running away." Hoshimiya patted the backpack under her arm.

I thought her backpack looked bigger than it had earlier today. So it's actually full of stuff? Looks like she didn't just get carried away and run away off the cuff. "Bath's on the first floor."

"Okay."

It felt like the two of us were being very succinct with each other for some reason. I was stiffening up from nerves, and perhaps Hoshimiya was too. We went downstairs, and I led her to the bathroom. The living room lights were off—Namika had returned to her room. Hoshimiya placed her change of clothes next to the washing machine.

"The towels are over there. Feel free to use the shampoo and whatnot."

Hoshimiya nodded.

"Cool... Then I'll wait in the living room," I said and skedaddled out of the bathroom.

The thought that Hoshimiya was going to take a bath in my house called to mind some uninvited imagery. To rid myself of those fantasies, I turned on the living room lights and TV. I picked up the remote and flipped to a music channel, but I couldn't focus at all.

I could hear muffled shower noises coming from the bathroom. I closed the door to the living room, somehow successfully shutting out the distraction.

Taking a slow, deep breath, I switched mental gears.

Hoshimiya is in a delicate state right now. That's why she came to me for help. She's depending on me, so I mustn't think wicked thoughts! I am going to be someone she can rely on. Determination renewed, I continued watching the music show, though I could barely comprehend what I was listening to as time ticked by.

I didn't know how long I'd spent in a stupor. Suddenly, I heard a knocking sound, and the door to the living room opened.

"Thanks for letting me use your bath," Hoshimiya said when she came in, hair still damp.

She wasn't wearing pajamas, but an oversized white T-shirt and cotton shorts. Her shorts were quite...short, so for a brief instant, I'd thought she was only wearing a T-shirt. Alluring thighs peeked out from underneath those two thin layers.

I unwittingly gulped.

"Hey, is there an outlet I can use?" Hoshimiya looked around the room, showing no signs of noticing the turmoil inside my mind. She held a dryer in her hand. It wasn't ours, so she must've brought it with her.

"There's one over there." I pointed next to the sofa I was on.

Hoshimiya sat down beside me and began drying her hair. "Natsuki-kun, are you going to take a bath too?"

"Y-Yeah... Right. Okay, I'll go take one now," I said and fled from the living room, but now I had to face a different problem in the bathroom.

Well, what else can I say? When I imagine using a shower that Hoshimiya's just used... It's very you-know-what. And how can I not breathe in that sweet, lingering fragrance... Th-This is bad! Don't think about anything!

I am the void. Right here, right now, I will reach zen. I will reach mushin... I put myself through the stringent mental training that I'd seen in battle manga and somehow finished showering safely.

After Hoshimiya finished drying her hair in the living room, the two of us returned to my room.

“We have a floor futon for guests, but where do you want to lay it out?” I asked her, opening the closet to double-check it was there. *Hoshimiya’s a girl, so she might be scared to sleep in the same area as me. My parents won’t be home tonight, so we can bring the futon down to the living room.*

I gave her a rundown of her options, and she shook her head. “I want...to stay here with you,” she replied, voice shaking.

I nodded wordlessly and laid the futon atop the carpet next to my bed. Hoshimiya took a seat on it, hugging her knees to her chest. I picked up the barley tea I’d snagged from the fridge earlier, poured it into a cup, and handed it to her.

“It’s... It’s cold,” she commented, sipping it slowly.

I sat on my bed, looking down at Hoshimiya, who was leaning against the side of the bed frame. I glanced at her smartphone screen—it was filled with missed calls.

After a moment, she murmured, “I should call them.”

“Yeah... You should at least let them know you’re safe,” I answered in agreement.

Just as I said that, she received another call. Displayed on the screen was, unsurprisingly, “Hoshimiya Sei.” She’d put her phone on vibrate, so although the call continued to flash on her screen, it made no noise.

“I’d better answer,” she said. Her face was pale, and her hands trembled.

I got down from the bed, taking a seat next to her. I grasped her free hand in mine and squeezed it encouragingly. She looked at me in surprise, but then gave me a firm squeeze in return.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Hikari?! Where are you right now?! I’ve been so worried!” Her father sounded considerably panicked.

He sounds sincere at least.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop fooling around with this running away nonsense and come home this instant! Tell me where you are, right now! I’ll come get you!” he bellowed. Disregarding the actual contents of his words, not an ounce of kindness dwelled in his tone.

Hoshimiya’s slender fingers tightened around my palm. “Listen, papa... I’m not coming home.” Though her voice shook, her declaration was adamant.

“Hikari? Where is this attitude coming from? Is it because I told you to stop dabbling in writing novels? I said that for your sake. You should do something more worthwhile with your life. Surely you understand that? I know you’re a reasonable girl.”

“Stop dabbling in writing novels”? He told her what? “Do something more worthwhile”? What the hell is he saying?! His daughter’s been writing since she was a kid, and here he’s dismissing all her hard work for such a stupid reason?

“You’re wrong, papa. I’m not that kind of girl. I’ve just been suppressing the real me until now.”

“What are you saying? I don’t remember raising you to speak that way.”

“That’s right. I never intended to tell you how I feel because I’d already given up on just about everything. I thought it’d be better if I did whatever you said. After all, as long as I didn’t defy you, you wouldn’t get mad at me. I thought there was nothing else for me to do, even if I didn’t have as much freedom as other kids,” Hoshimiya said. She took a breath and then continued, almost yelling now. “But I can’t keep this up; I can’t give up on everything! Papa, even if you tell me no, this is something I want to do no matter what! I can’t stop writing after all the time I’ve poured into my novels. My dream is to be an author, and I won’t give up!”

“Hikari, I’ll say it a thousand times if I have to: I’m thinking about you—”

“Also! I want to hang out with everyone else. I want to go to the beach with them too! This is...the first time I’ve ever made such wonderful friends. I won’t distance myself from them—not a *chance*!”

Distance herself? What’s this about?

“What... What selfish drive! Do you honestly think it’s acceptable for you to act this way?!”

“Why can’t I be selfish? Let me spread my wings more,” Hoshimiya said and hung up.

A hush fell over us, and all I could hear was the chirping of crickets from outside. Our hands were still intertwined; Hoshimiya showed no sign of letting go. She just continued to stare at her phone. Then, as if remembering something, she opened RINE and sent, *“I’m at my friend’s house so don’t worry.”* The recipient was not Sei-san, but her mom.

I couldn’t think of anything tactful to say, so I remained silent. I sat there and continued holding her hand—continued showing her that she wasn’t alone.

“I’ve tried to not treasure anything,” Hoshimiya said after a while. “As long as I didn’t care, I could give it up easily. In fact, I’ve already given up on most things. There wasn’t much I wanted in the first place...but it looks like I couldn’t become a doll.”

She paused for a moment before continuing. “Because there are things I just can’t give up on.”

As far as I was concerned, her ambition was exactly how youth had to be.

Hoshimiya let go of my hand and took out a sheaf of papers from her backpack. It was the draft I had read today. “I didn’t used to have friends, so books were my solace. I naturally came to love reading. Then, I started daydreaming and scrawling ideas on paper...and just like that, I fell in love with writing too. I want people to read my work and enjoy it. I want my words to reach lots of people... And eventually, I want to become an author.”

She traced the letters she had composed on her manuscript with a finger. “Today, after I left the café...I made it home before my curfew.” Little by little, she began to recount what had happened to spur her to disobey Sei-san and run away from home. “But papa was very upset for some reason...and he was already unhappy because of my lie about the trip.”

Though she hadn’t missed her curfew, it had been extremely close. Seeing how late Hoshimiya had returned, Sei-san interrogated her about what she’d

been up to all day. She answered him honestly, telling him that she'd been writing a novel at the café—and that her friend had been there too.

Sei-san hadn't held Hoshimiya's hobby in high regard from the beginning, so he used this as an opportunity to order her to stop writing. I'd overheard him say something similar on the phone, but earlier he'd told her that she should be spending her time on more important pursuits, like studying, sports, and self-improvement.

She refused and shook her head, giving Sei-san a huge surprise. Hoshimiya always immediately conceded to his mandates, so it was unthinkable that she'd ever resist. He tried to persuade her, but Hoshimiya hated the idea so much that she refused to listen. Then and there, she'd told him that she wanted to be an author.

"His face looked so dumb. He must've been thunderstruck. I'd never told anyone that I wanted to be an author before, not even Yuino-chan... Until I told you today, Natsuki-kun."

Of course, Sei-san had not taken this well. *"I've never heard you mention this before! That profession is unstable. You won't know if you'll be able to succeed! It's extraneous work!"*

"Natsuki-kun, I'm grateful to you. I've been lying to myself this whole time. When I told you what I wanted to do, I finally became confident that writing was my dream—my future."

Though Hoshimiya had been afraid of how Sei-san might react, she'd remained steadfast. But that made him want to restrict her more, rather than accept her determination. *"Distance yourself from your friends,"* he'd said.

"Because of the trip, he thought you guys were bad influences on me," she explained. "Obviously, I told him I didn't want to."

"Then you must pick one to give up," Sei-san had insisted, thinking he could control his daughter by forcing her to make a choice.

"I thought about it for a bit. If it had been the old me, I might've chosen to separate myself from my friends. I would've put up a wall between us by acting superficial... But both things are precious to me now," Hoshimiya said. "Yuino-

chan has always been with me...and after meeting you, Uta-chan, Reita-kun, and Tatsuya-kun... Before I knew it, I was so close to you guys and loved all of you.”

She turned to me, a faint smile playing on her lips. “I mean it. I could never bring myself to leave you guys now. It might not look like it, but I want to stay with you all.”

However, Sei-san would not yield. Hoshimiya hadn’t been confident that she could convince Sei-san in a quarrel. So she ran away from home as a show of retaliation.

“Yeah... I can’t believe he told you that! I can’t imagine life without you around,” I said.

“You’re so sly, Natsuki-kun, always spewing cool stuff like that.”

“I’m not trying to sound cool; I’m being honest! I mean that as a friend, you know?”

“Mm-hmm... I know. Thanks, it makes me really happy.”

The clock’s hands had moved right past midnight in the blink of an eye. We were engrossed in deep conversation, so neither of us had noticed how late it had become.

“We should sleep,” I suggested.

“Yeah.”

I left Hoshimiya’s side and got into bed. I heard rustling from the futon as she wormed her way under the blankets.

“Is it okay to leave the AC on while we sleep?”

“Yeah. But could you make it a bit warmer?”

“Do you like having a light on?”

“I prefer total darkness.”

“Got it. Well then, g’night, Hoshimiya.”

“Good night, Haibara-kun.”

I turned the light off and covered myself with a thin blanket. Normally I would be asleep by now, but my eyes were wide open, and I didn't feel like I'd doze off anytime soon. The reason was self-explanatory: I sensed someone else in the room. I could hear clothes rustling and muted breathing—the girl I loved was sleeping in my room!

Suddenly, Hoshimiya whispered, “Natsuki-kun, are you still awake?” Apparently she wasn't sleepy either.

“What's up?”

“You know, I like you, Natsuki-kun.”

Oh, really? She likes Natsuki-kun, huh? Wait, she likes Natsuki-kun? She likes...me? Hoshimiya likes me?! Say what?! Why in the world?! What the hell just happened?!

“I like you and everyone else too. I love you guys.”

Oh, yes, of course... That's what she meant. Like, “as a friend,” right? 'Course. I knew that from the get-go. I wasn't shaken up in the slightest. Obviously!

“To tell the truth, I didn't really like you much in the beginning.”

“Urgh... R-Really?” It felt like I'd just been stabbed with a knife.

“You seemed like a poser and acted kinda suspicious, but you were surprisingly optimistic, and you were really good at school and sports, even though you didn't seem to try very hard. It was like you could do no wrong, and your face kinda irritated me.”

“S-S-Slow down... Can you stop there? My mental strength is as fragile as glass,” I said weakly.

Hoshimiya giggled.

So that's what she thought of me? I... I see... And here I thought she had a relatively positive impression of me thanks to my cleaned-up appearance. The human heart truly is difficult to understand!

“But you know, after I saw your squabble with Tatsuya on the roof, I suddenly felt closer to you. I thought, ‘Oh, here's someone who might be like me.’”

“I’m not too sure about all that... I’m just putting up a bold front.”

I always acted with caution and prudence, and I could only excel because I had seven extra years of experience that no one else knew about. That didn’t mean my personality had changed much for the better.

“Well, you were plain and gloomy like me originally. I could identify with that, though maybe you don’t understand what I mean.”

“Even if you tell me that you used to be a gloomy and meek girl, I just can’t imagine it.” Right now, Hoshimiya was the cheerful, bright, slightly clumsy, beautiful, and popular idol of our school.

“Here, look at this. It’s kinda embarrassing though.”

I heard her squirming under the blankets and looked over. She was holding up her phone from below, the screen shining brightly in the darkness of my room. Displayed there was a photo of a girl in elementary school. Her hair was so long that it veiled her face, and she wore tacky glasses.

“Huh? Is that you, Hoshimiya?”

“Yeah. This is from back when I didn’t have a single friend.”

“Wow... You... Uh, yeah, this is very unexpected.”

“Yep, my disguise is impeccable. Go ahead and praise me!” she said gleefully with a smug laugh.

Is the cheerfulness also a part of your disguise? “Don’t you get tired of acting like that?” I asked. After all, I was very familiar with the feeling. When I first started putting up a front, I’d found it fairly exhausting. I focused too hard on being perfect and feared showing my true self to others. It was thanks to Miori’s encouragement that this was no longer a problem.

“I dunno... I guess I’m used to it already. I don’t feel uncomfortable,” she said. Then, words spilled out of her like little drops of rain. “I wonder which is the real me.”

The cold tone of her remark had come from a Hoshimiya I didn’t know. The girl with a warm, cheerful timbre to her voice and a bright smile on her face was nowhere to be found. Today I was witnessing many facets of her.

“Anyway, after that happened, you gradually showed us your true nature, and I wanted to learn more about the real you. Then, you chatted with me about the novels and movies I like... And I thought, ‘Aha! He really *does* sound like an otaku, how funny!’”

“Oh, quiet! You’re one to talk. When you go on about stories, you sound like an otaku too. I don’t see you trying to disguise that—you’re just a normal otaku girl.”

“Sh-Shut up! What’s wrong with that?! Won’t the school idol seem easier to talk to if she’s got one hobby like that? I definitely didn’t talk about them because I wanted—”

“Hoshimiya... Do you think you’re the school’s idol?” *Well, it is true. But it sounds like she fancies herself as one.*

I heard something flumping on the floor and looked over to see Hoshimiya wrapped up in her blanket, rolling around.

“Natsuki-kun... You tricked me!” she exclaimed, voice thick with spite.

Hey, that’s a false accusation! “No way, you set yourself up.” I feel like she’s treating me coldly now. Does that mean we’re closer? At any rate, at least I don’t feel nervous anymore!

“I guess you could say I think that... But it’s more like I’m playing the *role* of the school idol,” Hoshimiya said, her voice fading to a whisper at the end. She appeared quite embarrassed as she continued to roll around, cocooned in the blanket with her face buried in a pillow.

“Don’t you feel hot like that?” I asked.

“I do... Shut uuup,” she said sulkily.

I inadvertently chuckled.

“I’m going to sleep. Please don’t talk to me anymore.”

She was the one who’d initiated the conversation, but I complied and closed my eyes. “Okay, okay.”

After I’d kept my eyes shut for a while, I finally started feeling drowsy. I surrendered myself to slumber, my consciousness sinking to the bottom of the

sea. I thought I heard a quiet whisper just before drifting off.

“Thank you for helping me.”

When I opened my eyelids, a bespectacled Hoshimiya was peering at me. “Oh, you’re up? Good morning!”

Am I dreaming? I must be. Good night!

“Aw, he went back to sleep.”

I tried to delude myself into thinking that I was sleeping, but apparently this was not a product of my imagination. *I’d better wake up and face reality.* I opened my eyes once more, meeting Hoshimiya’s gaze. She was so close—enough that I could feel her breath on me.

“Morning,” I managed to fumble out.

Hoshimiya giggled, her hand covering a little smile.

Is she an angel? It’s almost despicable how pretty she is. I can’t handle the destructive force packed inside her beauty when I’ve only just woken up! I slowly sat up and checked the time. Because we had chatted late into the night yesterday, I’d overslept. Normally, I’d be making breakfast by now.

“Natsuki-kun, you’re cute when you’re sleeping,” she remarked blithely and poked my cheek.

Hey! You darn flirt! But at least now I know that she’s acting with some self-awareness. After all, she calls herself the school’s idol. Yeah, just a self-proclaimed one! That’s why I won’t fall for...such a measly... Sh-Shit! She’s too damn cute!

“What’s wrong?” Hoshimiya asked. “Your face is red.”

It irked me that I was in the palm of her hands, so I launched a counterattack and poked her cheek in return. She jolted up in surprise.

“H-Hoshimiya... You’re cute today too,” I stuttered out, voice trembling. My remark came out spectacularly creepy.

We both sat there in silence. *Oh, boy, the mood is so awkward now... M-*

Maybe I shouldn't have done that. Hoshimiya had turned to stone, blushing hard. *Wow... Was I really that cringe? I'm so sorry! I got carried away.*

"O... Onii-chan?" I heard a voice call from the door.

Hoshimiya and I hurriedly backed away from each other. Suddenly, the door cracked open with Namika peeking out from behind. *Dude, knock first!*

Her face reddened as she kept glancing between me and Hoshimiya. "Um, where's breakfast?"

Dear sister, make it yourself sometimes.

I went down to the kitchen and threw something together for us.

"Is there anything I can help with?" Hoshimiya asked.

"In that case, can you take out the barley tea?" I replied.

"Okaaay!"

She turned to the fridge, but Namika cut in. "No! Just sit tight right here! Onii-chan will handle everything!"

"At the very least, shouldn't you offer to do it?" I retorted.

"Now, now," Namika said as if to calm me.

You're not tricking anyone with that act! I don't mind doing it, but you could at least try to come up with a more creative response.

An amused smile spread across Hoshimiya's face as she watched our sibling banter. "Natsuki-kun, you're so different at home. It's a new experience."

"Really?"

"You're so polite to everyone at school, after all."

"Hmm. I feel like I've been easing off of that act lately... Well, I guess I am polite compared to how I treat my family."

"Huh? What the heck? Be more polite to me too then!" Namika piped up with displeasure.

I ignored my sister's complaints and cracked eggs into the frying pan. While I

cooked a simple breakfast for the three of us, Hoshimiya and Namika chatted. My sister jabbered awkwardly, so Hoshimiya adapted to her communication style with a gentle smile.

“So... Are you dating my brother? I wouldn’t recommend him.”

“Really? I think Natsuki-kun is a good person.”

“Nope, no way. His real nature is like a villainous boss— Wait, you’re actually going out with him?!”

“Stop asking dumb questions, Namika. And Hoshimiya, don’t tease her; deny it!” I scolded the two.

Hoshimiya giggled. “Sorry, my bad.”

We continued chitchatting like this until breakfast was ready. The table had been set courtesy of Hoshimiya and Namika working together. I was amazed by how quickly girls could hit it off.

“Yay! Natsuki-kun’s home cooking!”

“Don’t get too excited. All I did was fry some eggs, ham, and sausages,” I warned her.

We had some leftover miso soup and extra rice in the freezer that I’d made yesterday too. It wasn’t exactly a spread that I’d call “cooking.”

Though I insisted it wasn’t much, Hoshimiya still looked overjoyed. “When everyone else visited you at work, I didn’t get to go, so let me be excited!”

For a moment I didn’t know what she was referring to, but then I remembered the first night that Tatsuya, Uta, and Reita had dropped by Café Mares while Nanase and I were on the clock.

Oh, yeah. If I recall correctly, Hoshimiya messaged the group, “No fair!” Even as far back as that time, she must’ve been holding herself back a lot. The little things she’s given up on have gradually snowballed until she almost had her dreams and friends snatched out of her hands...and by her own family, no less! I can’t believe her father, a man who’s raised her for so many years, would do that.

“Natsuki-kun?” Hoshimiya tilted her head quizzically to the side.

“It’s... It’s nothing.” I shook my head and began eating.

I’m on cloud nine because Hoshimiya’s at my house, but there’s still a problem: she can’t stay here forever. Now that she’s had a day to calm down, she needs to come up with a solution. I pondered in deep thought as I opened the door to my room.

“Ah! H-Hold on a sec!”

By the time I heard her, it was already too late. I froze for a moment, and all that slipped out of me was a silly-sounding, “Hwah?”

The first thing I glimpsed was a white bra, and then Hoshimiya’s arms quickly moved to cover herself up. However, there was clearly too much for her two limbs to hide, my attention stolen by a deep valley. Flustered, I lowered my gaze, but then I could see the small details of her stomach and the beautiful curves of her waist. As I continued dropping my eyes down to the ground, I also gleaned a certain area being covered by a piece of white triangular cloth, a pair of well-proportioned thighs, and—

“Um... Please don’t stare at me like that.” Hoshimiya’s voice was a faint whisper, as if she were about to disappear, and her face was crimson.



I snapped back to my senses. “I-I’m sorry!”

I hastily turned around and scrambled out the door, closing it behind me. My heartbeat pounded loudly like a drum. I heard clothes rustling from inside the room. The image of Hoshimiya in her underwear was burned into my eyes, and I couldn’t shut it out of my mind. *But man! She may look slender in clothing...but she’s got even more there than I thought...*

“You can come in now,” she called through the door.

I took a deep breath before entering again. Hoshimiya had changed into a pretty white dress.

“Um...sorry about that.”

“I’m sorry too. I thought I could quickly change while you were gone.” She didn’t seem angry, which was a relief, but her lips protruded in a discontented pout. “But you didn’t need to ogle at me for so long!”

Yes. You’re exactly right... I have no excuses.

“Perv,” Hoshimiya whispered.

I pretended like I hadn’t heard her and changed the topic. “So, what’s the plan for today?”

Her expression turned solemn. “I thought a lot last night.” She plopped down on my bed, so I sat next to her. “Nothing will change even if I run away.”

“Yeah... I doubt he’d change his mind so easily,” I said in agreement. Not that she needed my input—she knew Sei-san much better than I did.

Hoshimiya nodded. “That’s why I need to use this opportunity to persuade him. I have to stop thinking that resistance is futile.”

“That’d be great if you could convince him...but do you have a specific plan in mind?”

Hoshimiya groaned in reply, wearing a conflicted look on her face.

“Then let’s summarize the situation,” I said and put up a finger. “You left home to rebel against Sei-san. You did that because he disapproved of your hobby and dream. Plus, he told you to distance yourself from your friends. Is all

that correct?”

She nodded.

Her problem could be divided into four separate matters that needed to be resolved: Sei-san had told her to quit her longtime hobby of writing novels. He wanted her to give up on becoming an author. He'd ordered her to stop hanging out with her friends. And finally, he put too many severe restrictions on her in general. I put up four fingers to represent each issue, and Hoshimiya nodded again when I'd finished running through her current predicament.

Sei-san had told her to quit writing novels because he thought her time should be spent on more meaningful things, like studying, sports, and so on. Similarly, he didn't want her to become an author because that occupation didn't suit his ideal image of a daughter. From his perspective, there were too many things that could go awry in the world of publishing, and there was no guarantee that she would succeed.

“I think we need a realistic answer to those two problems first,” I said. Hoshimiya blinked at me, confused as to what I was suggesting. “For example, you want to become an author, but that doesn't mean you have to abandon your other options. You could make your publishing debut while leaving open the possibility for college and a regular job.”

What we needed wasn't wishful thinking, but a realistic plan. Though Sei-san was extremely stubborn, he was a talented individual who would one day become the president of a large company. Trying to tug at his heartstrings with emotions wouldn't work. We were more likely to get through to him with a logical argument.

“That's what I've always intended on doing. I did some research on my own, but I know being an author is a harsh business where you can't survive if you don't sell. Even if I can get published, I still might have to work a second job.”

“Which means you'd need to juggle multiple jobs at once... What's Sei-san think of that?”

“I haven't told him. Yesterday was the first time I ever mentioned that becoming an author was my dream. I've told him before that I write novels, but it looks like he thought it was nothing more than a hobby.”

“Then maybe if we tell him what you’re thinking, he’ll accept your dream.”

Sei-san was the type to treat other people like pawns on his chess board, but that was because he believed if everyone listened to his instructions, it would lead to a better outcome. At least, that’s what I’d learned from my interview with him. *But a company president has gotta be kinda unhinged to say stuff like that to a job-hunting student. Grudges aside, it is important for Hoshimiya to have confidence in her abilities.*

The reason he fettered Hoshimiya with so many strict rules and treated her like a doll was probably on account of a similar thought process: he believed that his own judgment was superior to his daughter’s. If that was the case, then we had to disprove him. Hoshimiya had to show her father that she was a human being who could think for herself. I left out the details of my interview and explained that idea to her.

She frowned. “I wonder if I even can.”

I’m sure Sei-san loves his daughter. The way he shows it is pretty twisted, but he gives her directives because he cares about her a lot. If he didn’t, then he wouldn’t bother to comment on her behavior. If Hoshimiya wants to fight against his hold, his fatherly affection for her will be her path to victory.

“Okay, I’ll make papa believe in me,” she said, neatly summarizing her objective.

“If you can, then the third and fourth problems might be resolved too,” I added. *If he trusts his daughter to make decisions, then he’ll stop getting on her case about her friends. Plus, he should go easier on her with all the rules. Though, he might not let up on the curfew.*

“Natsuki-kun, you really are smart. No wonder you’re the top student in our grade.”

“Nah, I just organized the issue into concrete words. We can’t fix a problem if it’s vague.”

Define the issue then think of a plan—this was a process I had used many times for my research in college. Complaining about a situation wouldn’t change anything. It was important to tackle everything with a logical approach

in order to reach a solution. *I wonder how parents feel when their kids use that kind of adult logic on them.*

“All right, then. I’ll start brainstorming ways to get papa to believe in me,” Hoshimiya declared resolutely, clenching her fists in front of her chest.

It’s probably best to let her think about how to do that for herself. I can give advice, but if I help too much, it’ll just end up becoming my idea, which wouldn’t be good for her.

“Hmm...” She immediately crossed her arms and began ruminating with a serious expression.

“Brainstorming is a good place to start, but do you wanna go somewhere you can get comfortable?” I asked. *Namika is still home, and it’ll be annoying if she sticks her neck in this. That girl has too much free time!*

“Oh, yeah. Good idea. Let’s go, then.”

So I began to make preparations to go outside as well. When I opened my closet, Hoshimiya marveled at its contents. “Oooh! Boys’ clothes!”

Besides the new clothes I bought, all my other outfits are lame, so please don’t look too close! I begged internally. “Hey, uh, I want to change now.”

“Natsuki-kun, you gawked at me when I was in the middle of changing.”

“Are you still mad at me for that?” I asked fearfully.

She laughed gleefully and then exited my room. *I wish you’d stop making jokes that I can’t pick up on! Though the image of you in your underwear is burned into my retinas.* I quickly changed clothes, told Namika we were heading out, and left.

Though the clouds shrouded the sun, we were enveloped in sticky humidity outside. *It’s freaking hot today!*

As if the thought had struck her out of nowhere, Hoshimiya remarked, “You know, you seem awfully familiar with my papa.”

“I...saw his profile on his company’s website.”

It was a lame excuse, but thankfully Hoshimiya just gave a small hum in reply.

My town didn't have a single café or family restaurant, so we rode the train to Takasaki. We went to Hoshimiya's favorite café, the one we'd been at yesterday.

"Welcome," the reticent shopkeeper said and guided us to our table.

We sat in the same corner by the window as the day before. Hoshimiya opened her laptop and began making quiet thinking noises with a serious expression. I checked on her every now and then as I did my summer homework. I'd have just zoned out in boredom otherwise.

"Papa actually likes reading novels." She stopped typing away and took a sip of coffee. "That's what made me start reading. He had so many books in his study."

"Then there's hope that he'll approve of your dream."

"Yeah. I gave it more thought, and I'll probably need a weapon to fight with."

"A weapon?"

"Even if I try talking to him, I doubt he'll listen to me. So I need something to demonstrate my skills. Something to show him that I have the talent to write. I'll get him to say my novel is interesting." She nodded firmly. "Yeah!"

Good point. One of the reasons Sei-san is against her dream is because there's no surefire way to become an author. He probably even thinks that she can't possibly become one. Hoshimiya's "weapon" would help in that case. Once he realizes his daughter has talent, he might change his mind.

"Once I do that, we'll finally be able to talk on the same level."

Seeing his daughter's talent will be a good way to make him believe in her capabilities and trust her sense of judgment too. "I think it's a good idea," I said with a nod.

Hoshimiya rummaged through her backpack and took out a stack of paper. It was the same draft she'd shown me yesterday. She gave it a light smack.

"I'm going to show papa this one. It's my best work yet! If I fix the parts you pointed out, then he'll definitely think it's great. He enjoys stories just like I do,

after all.”

Don't you mean you like stories just like he does? I kept that thought to myself, though. “I’ll help you out. Well, all I can do is read it and tell you my opinions.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it, but I think you’ve done enough. I’ve relied on you so much already,” she replied. “You’re spoiling me with how nice you are.”

“I’m doing this for me, so don’t worry about it.”

I’m not lying. I’m just helping her out because I want to. I’m here because I want to learn more about her. Besides, I thought her novel was interesting, so I want to see it soar to even greater heights. I’m doing all this for my own benefit... Also, Sei-san pisses me off, so I want her to win against him. I don’t have a personal vendetta against him! Definitely not.

“That’s what all nice people say,” Hoshimiya murmured, her eyes glistening as if she were looking at something pretty. Then, she balled her hands in front of her chest to hype herself up. “All right! I’m gonna work my butt off!”

And so, she began revising her manuscript. I took a break from working on my summer homework to reread her novel one more time. I wanted to become Hoshimiya Hikari’s strength in this confrontation, even if only a little.

We pulled out all the stops to perfect Hoshimiya’s novel. She revised the parts that I’d specified, and for the trickier sections, we would put our heads together. We’d pick each other’s brains for ways to improve it, and once Hoshimiya was satisfied, she would rewrite it. *Man... Creators really are something else.*

I was good at articulating the apparent weaknesses of a story. I could pick out what needed work by analyzing the composition and plot. But that didn’t mean I knew how to fix those problems. However, she would churn out ideas one after another regardless of quality. “I create a setting in my head and then let the characters go,” she simply said, but I couldn’t do that.

Hoshimiya looks really cool when she’s typing with that serious glint in her eyes. Maybe I should go ahead and get her autograph now.

While I was admiring her passion, my phone started ringing in my pocket. “Hmm?” I took it out. Displayed on the screen was a call from Nanase Yuino. Hoshimiya looked up at me questioningly. “I’m gonna take this outside,” I told her and left the café to answer.

“Hello, Haibara-kun,” Nanase said when I picked up.

“Hey. Are you possibly calling about Hoshimiya?” I asked.

“‘Possibly’? Of course I’m calling about her.”

“Are...you angry?”

“I’m not particularly angry. I heard from Hikari’s parents that she was missing, and even though I was worried sick, I didn’t get a single message from you. Why would I be angry?”

She’s angry, all right. “Sorry,” I said timidly. I was so preoccupied last night that I forgot about everything else.

“It’s fine. Hikari messaged me in the end. But I couldn’t believe it when she said she was staying at your house. Despite how oblivious she seems, she’s not a girl who trusts boys very easily.”

“Well, you know, Hoshimiya went through a lot... She was practically chased all the way out here.”

“I more or less know what happened, though I had to fill in some details for myself. What do you two intend to do now?”

“We’ve got a rough plan to resolve all this figured out.” I disclosed Hoshimiya’s idea to Nanase.

“I see,” she murmured. “Where are you? At the café I told you about?”

“Yeah. We’re at Coffee Café Ruby Mare.”

“Wait there with Hikari. I’m coming over right now,” Nanase stated and hung up.

She’s scarier than usual. Where’d the angelic Nanase go? It is my fault for not contacting her sooner. There was a brief moment where I thought to ask Nanase or Miori for advice, but I didn’t have time to explore that idea! Honest! Plus, it

was really late at night too, I reasoned as I went back inside the café.

“Nanase’s coming here,” I told Hoshimiya when I got back inside the café.

“Huh?” she uttered, shrinking back in her seat. “W-Was... Was she angry?”

“I think so... Extremely angry.”

“E-Eep... I hung up on papa because he was aggravating, and then I got a call from Yuino-chan... I didn’t pick up because I panicked.”

The two of us waited for Nanase, trembling in our seats, until the door opened with a chime—Nanase had entered the store. She was wearing a beret tilted slightly on her head, a T-shirt with a muted pattern, and a miniskirt. Her long, slender legs were bare and beautiful.

“So hot...” she muttered, fed up with the summer weather.

“S-Sup.”

“W-We’re over here!”

We both called out, our voices shaking with trepidation. She wordlessly strutted over. Hoshimiya’s side of the table was crowded with her laptop and backpack, so Nanase sat next to me. She called the shopkeeper over and ordered an iced caffè latte. Once she’d finished settling down, she finally fixed her attention on us.

“Hikari.”

“Y-Yes!” Hoshimiya flinched.

“Why didn’t you come to me for help?”

“Well, I’m always depending on you for everything... So I wanted to figure it out on my own since I bother you all the time.”

“You’re not a bother. Besides, you turned to Haibara-kun for help in the end. Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Urgh,” Hoshimiya whimpered. Nanase’s lecture was dealing some heavy damage. “I-I’m sorry.”

“To begin with, what were you thinking, sleeping at a guy’s place when you’re not even dating him? Are you listening, Hikari? Don’t you have any sense of self-

preservation? You only made it out unscathed because Haibara-kun is a wimp.”

“Hey!” I interjected. *Who’re you calling a wimp?!*

Nanase glared at me, her wrath now pointed directly at me. “And you! Couldn’t you have thought of something else?”

“Maybe, but it was late, and my town is in the middle of nowhere. Plus, I was pretty shaken up, so I wasn’t thinking straight,” I answered sheepishly. “Oh, but I didn’t do anything to her.”

“I *know* you didn’t do anything,” she replied.

Hoshimiya peered out the window and whispered, “He saw me in my underwear.”

You’re still mad at me about that?!

“Haibara-kun?” Nanase pulled my ear, an eerie smile pasted on her face.

“That was beyond my control!” I yelped. *Oh, come on! That one was definitely Hoshimiya’s fault! Not mine! Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have committed the moment to memory!*

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” Hoshimiya said, lowering her head deeply.

Nanase let out a long sigh. “It’s fine. What matters is that you’re safe.” Right when we’d all calmed down, her iced caffè latte was brought over. She took a sip to soothe her throat before she continued speaking. “I heard what happened from Haibara-kun over the phone. You’re rebelling against Sei-san, right?”

Hoshimiya nodded, her nerves showing on her face.

“But can you follow through? You couldn’t oppose him before, so do you think you can resist him now?” Nanase’s frigid voice was testing Hoshimiya. Her history with Hoshimiya and Sei-san ran much deeper, which was exactly why she wanted to see how prepared her friend was.

“Yes. After all, there are things that I absolutely don’t want to give up,” Hoshimiya said with determination.

Nanase examined her closely. “Very well. Then I’ll help too. Are you rewriting

your manuscript?”

“Yeah. I think it’s improved quite a lot. Wanna read it, Yuino-chan?” Hoshimiya asked, but then hurriedly added, “Oh, but how will you read it?”

We were mostly done tweaking her novel, but we hadn’t printed it yet. Nanase could read it on the laptop, but then Hoshimiya wouldn’t be able to keep working, which would be an unproductive arrangement.

“We have a printer over there. Feel free to use it,” the shopkeeper said, wiping cups without looking at us. We looked in the direction indicated to find an old printer.

“Th-Thank you!” Hoshimiya exclaimed and immediately set to work printing her draft.

“Well, I was the one who told you to be by her side,” Nanase said to me as she watched Hoshimiya. “How’d it go? Did you help her?”

“Nah. I didn’t do anything. I just told her how I felt about her novel,” I replied.

“I see. We can leave your contribution at that, then.”

Afterwards, Nanase began reading Hoshimiya’s story, which had been revised many times and was filled with all her heart and soul. Hoshimiya fidgeted in her seat but rechecked her manuscript one more time. She carefully combed through each sentence for any typos or outlandish phrases. I assisted her in the final editing process.

Crimson hues tinged the sky, and by the time Nanase finished reading, night had fallen. “That...was enthralling,” she said pensively.

The nerves that had filled Hoshimiya flew out as her shoulders relaxed. “Thank goodness! I’m glad it was interesting.”

“Hoshimiya and I read it so many times that we weren’t sure anymore,” I remarked.

“Yeah! I kept asking myself, ‘Huh? Is this really okay?’” she piped up in agreement.

Nanase looked conflicted as she watched us buzz. “I’m not good at giving specific feedback. I truly enjoyed it. However...”

Sensing something amiss, Hoshimiya grew tense.

“Isn’t the protagonist basically you, Hikari?”

“Huh?” Hoshimiya froze.

Really? Mamika, the protagonist, is a plain and meek girl with superb deductive reasoning skills. There’s not much resemblance between her and the current Hoshimiya...but now that I think about it, there are similarities between her and the old Hoshimiya. The deductive reasoning part is just there because it’s a mystery novel.

“I think that’s fine.” Nanase flipped through the pages as she glanced between me and Hoshimiya. “But did you model the boy after Haibara-kun?”

Huh? She did?! This time, I was the one who froze, eyes wide as saucers. Mamika’s partner in action is a boy named Shintaro. He’s a popular and proactive kid from her class. Normally he wears a friendly smile, but he’s actually a coolheaded, prudent guy. How is that based on me?!

“I think you’re dead wrong there,” I told Nanase. Exasperated, she pointed at Hoshimiya, who was as red as a boiled lobster. When our eyes met, Hoshimiya immediately averted her gaze. “What’s wrong? Don’t tell me she’s actually right.”

“Sh-Sh-She’s not! Um, there’s no resemblance at all!” Hoshimiya spluttered.

“You didn’t have to deny it that strongly,” I replied, feeling a bit hurt. *Why is she so rattled? Even if she did model him after me, what’s the problem...?* But then I remembered: the protagonist, Mamika, fell in love with her partner, Shintaro, midway through the story. She was so smitten that he was practically all she could think about.

I felt my own cheeks heat up, and I couldn’t bring myself to look directly at Hoshimiya. An unbearable silence fell over the three of us. *Hey, now, calm down. It’s just fiction in the end. Just because she wrote it that way doesn’t mean there’s any correlation with reality.*

“Well, it doesn’t matter whether you used him as your model or not,” Nanase said.

If it doesn't matter, then don't casually toss out a bomb like that!

“Regardless of who you based this boy on, I think his personality is a bit flimsy. If he were to be modeled off of someone specific, then you could flesh him out a bit more so readers will find him more likable,” she explained. “That’s the only part that stuck out to me.”

The conversation halted with that. *It’s good news that Nanase enjoyed the story and only had one thing to comment on. That’s not a hard problem to solve, and she even offered a solution. I had similar sentiments about Shintaro though I didn’t think it was crucial to fix, so I didn’t point it out. Even if Hoshimiya based him on me, he’s clearly been glorified a lot. If we adjust this part, then it’ll be the perfect manuscript. Should be easy enough...but how do I fix this awkward atmosphere?*

“Then...Natsuki-kun. Can you, um, answer a few questions?” Hoshimiya asked.

“Of course... No problem at all,” I replied.

Nanase watched our timid exchange with an annoyed expression and then turned her attention to her watch. “Let’s stop here. It’s late, and Hikari missed her curfew a long time ago.”

“Oh, you’re right. I was so engrossed that I didn’t notice.” I glanced out the window. It was pitch-black outside.

“But what should I do? My manuscript isn’t complete yet,” Hoshimiya said.

If she went home now, Hoshimiya would inevitably quarrel with Sei-san. She wasn’t ready for that yet; she needed at least one more day to prepare. But she couldn’t stay at my place again since my mom would be home. *It’s not impossible to persuade mom to let Hoshimiya sleep over, but I’m not sure how it’ll go. Knowing mom, she would definitely say something like, “I have to contact your friend’s parents to be safe!”*

“Hikari, come home with me tonight,” Nanase said.

“Are you sure?”

“You can stay for just one night. Then, you have to go home tomorrow. My

mom will be upset if she finds out I'm helping you run away from home, so let's keep that part a secret."

Yeah, good idea. That's much more reasonable than her staying at my place.

"Thanks, Yuino-chan. I love you!" Overcome with emotion, Hoshimiya threw her arms around Nanase.

"Wait, Hikari, let go of me!" Nanase exclaimed. She was adorable when flustered.

With that, we went our separate ways.

Once I got home, I heard footsteps stampede towards me. Namika met me at the door and got on her tiptoes to look behind me.

"Where's Hoshimiya-san?"

"She went home," I replied, stretching the truth a little since she'd technically gone to Nanase's.

"Whaaat? I wanted to see her again." Namika pouted in displeasure and swiftly returned to her room.

I took a shower, ate the dinner that my mom had left for me, and flopped onto my bed with a full stomach. The first thing that I thought of was Hoshimiya's scarlet face. *The heroine is basically Hoshimiya, and the one she likes is a boy modeled after me. So...that means that, right?! It's gotta mean that! I hope it's that. I'm begging you, please let me be right for once.* While I prayed, my phone started ringing—Hoshimiya Hikari was calling me.

"G-Good evening," she said when I picked up.

"Y-Yo. Good evening." She had sounded so nervous that it infected me.

"Are you busy right now?"

"Nope. I was just zoning out."

"Seriously?" She giggled. "Anyway, can I ask you a bunch of stuff?"

"Sure, bring it on." *I'll answer whatever you want as long as it's not about my time leap. Come on! Ask me anything! My high school debut's already been*

exposed, so I'm invincible now!

"Then... Natsuki-kun, what do you think of me?"

Uh... What? It felt like I'd been holding up a shield and someone had just run a sword through it. "What do I think? Um, what do you mean?"

She fell silent. *Please, don't clam up now!*

"Erm, well... Like, your impression of me?"

"Easy. You're kind and bright... Maybe the real you is a bit different, but at least in front of me, you seem energetic and cheerful. Also, you're cute, and you're a nice girl." It started feeling like I was on the brink of confessing, so I hastily cut myself off. "Something like that?"

"R-Really? I see... Thanks."

Was that okay? I wondered, but then Hoshimiya began to speak again. One after another, she showered me with questions like unending rain:

"Natsuki-kun, I can tell you really treasure your friends. Why is that?"

"Natsuki-kun, why did you want to go through a high school glow up?"

"Natsuki-kun, what's your family like? I met your little sister yesterday, but can you tell me more?"

"Natsuki-kun, how do you normally spend your time? Like your hobbies and stuff."

"Natsuki-kun, what were you like in middle school?"

"Natsuki-kun, what's your favorite food? Ramen?"

"Natsuki-kun, do you want a girlfriend?"

"Natsuki-kun, what kind of girls do you like?"

"Natsuki-kun... Is there someone you like right now?"

After I'd answered all of her questions, I was granted a brief moment of silence to catch my breath. "I see," she murmured. What did she see? I didn't know.

Suddenly, I heard a piano playing in the background on her end. For a

moment, I wondered if she was playing a video or something, but the music sounded too far away. “Is someone playing the piano?”

“Oh, you can hear that? Yuino-chan just started playing.”

I could tell she was skilled even over the phone as she played Hisaishi Joe’s “Summer.”

“I told her to play a summeresque song,” Hoshimiya explained.

“She chose a good one. And it sounds like you’re making great progress too.”

“Yeah. I got to hear my song request, so I should get back to work now.”

“Hoshimiya,” I said, stopping her from hanging up. But I wavered, unsure of what to say next. “I...”

When she’d asked me so many questions about myself, it had been a good opportunity for me to reflect upon myself. I’d wanted to answer everything honestly, but I couldn’t bring myself to be completely truthful about the last question. I admitted there was someone I had in mind, naturally, but I had left something unsaid: there were two people I’d fallen for. I loved them about the same amount, and I couldn’t make up my mind.

“I probably know what you’re thinking,” Hoshimiya said.

I stopped breathing for a moment. I was too scared to dig deeper into the meaning lurking beneath her words.

“Don’t worry. That has nothing to do with the story. Though, maybe it’ll help me paint the characters more clearly.” After that, we said our goodbyes and hung up.

It wouldn’t be surprising if she knew. I’m pretty obvious about how I feel towards Hoshimiya. Plus, it’s a fact that I went to the Tanabata festival with Uta—and anyone can tell that she likes me. But we’re not dating. If anyone would know the reason Uta and I aren’t a couple yet, it’d be Hoshimiya. Despite how she acts, she’s actually very observant... In the end, what does Hoshimiya think of me? I don’t think she hates me, and it actually seems like she’s fond of me...but is that love?

I was always the one who didn’t understand anything about other people.

The next day, I had a rare morning shift at Café Mares. After work, I ate lunch there and then briskly walked to the café we'd been at yesterday. Nanase and Hoshimiya were already at our usual spot by the window when I arrived.

"Natsuki-kun!" Hoshimiya beamed like a blossoming flower when she spotted me. "Excellent timing, I just finished the revisions! I think it's perfect! I'm feeling really confident now!"

She was uncharacteristically worked up. I ran my eyes from the hyper Hoshimiya over to Nanase who simply shrugged at me.

"I reviewed it already and have no more criticisms. I thought the first version was good enough already," Nanase said.

"Great, then I'll look it over. Could you show me which parts you changed?" I asked.

"Yeah! Here, here, and I completely changed this scene here..."

I read through the edited sections—they had certainly improved. *Hey...this is definitely me. She weaved my answers from yesterday into here. That's embarrassing!* "Is this going to be usable? Shintaro's basically me now."

"Yes, I thought it was better that way... Is it bad?"

"It's not *bad*, but I think the guy the heroine falls for should have cooler lines and—"

"No. He's plenty cool like this," Hoshimiya interrupted, turning away from me.

He's...plenty cool? Really? But he's practically a carbon copy of me... Though, the change has improved the novel as a whole. The only problem is that I'm shy about it. "Okay. It is really interesting now. This is a great book! I think it'll work!" I exclaimed vigorously to build up her confidence.

The title had changed from the provisional *A Tale of the Summer Sea* to *The Detective Girl Does Not Know Love*. The new one seemed fitting to set the tone for a light novel.

Now that Hoshimiya has her weapon, all that's left is for her to go home and battle. As soon as I thought that, the door opened with a chime. I had a bad

feeling as I heard brisk, unhesitant footsteps approach us. I looked behind me to see Hoshimiya's father—Sei-san.

"So this is where you were, Hikari." His tone was icy and placid.

I saw Hoshimiya's hands trembling beneath the table. I grasped her hand in mine and boldly greeted him. "Oh, Hoshimiya's dad. Hello. Can I help you?"

"I have no business with you. Do take care not to provoke me unnecessarily right now. I'm sure my daughter has been relying on you two, correct? Well, I'm sorry that she's been troubling you both, but this is a family matter," Sei-san said calmly, sidestepping my audacious remark. After a few days, his head had cooled off. "We're going home now, Hikari. Don't burden others any further."

"You mean, 'don't burden *you*,' right?" Though Hoshimiya was pale and her voice quivered, her tone was filled with confidence.

"What did you say?" Sei-san frowned.

"Just so you know, we don't think of her as a burden. Our friend needed help, so of course we'd respond to her pleas," I said, intentionally keeping my voice devoid of emotion. The only thing I could do here was back her up. This was not my battle to fight.

"Sure, I'll come home. I was planning on it today anyway," Hoshimiya said cockily.

"I see. Then—"

"But in return, I want you to listen to what I have to say." She raised her head and locked eyes with Sei-san, taking in his expressionless countenance.

He glanced at the table where her laptop and manuscript were sitting. "You did say you wanted to become an author. Is that what this is about?"

"That's not all, though it's part of it... I *will* become an author."

"Did you not hear me when I told you to live a more meaningful life? How much time have you already wasted on this nonsense? Your grades are subpar as it is."

"I'll raise my grades and study properly. I'm aiming to become an author, but I'll also search for other options. Even if I get published, I'll need to work a side

job in the beginning, after all.”

“I see your head isn’t just full of dreams. If you promise to keep your grades up, then I’ll allow you to continue your hobby. However, your future career is a different story. It’s one thing for you to mention a side job, but can someone as clumsy as you really balance multiple jobs? Furthermore, do you think you have the talent to become an author? I doubt it,” Sei-san said matter-of-factly, as if he were merely admonishing his unreasonable daughter. “You can enjoy a happy and affluent life if you obediently do as I say.”

“No. I won’t. I’m going to live my own life.”

“You still don’t understand? I’m saying all this because I care about you. Don’t be selfish.”

“You’re the one being selfish. Stop pushing your feelings on me; I didn’t ask for it!”

“Hikari. I understand how you feel. I have also followed my late father’s directions since my youth. I underwent a harsh education, and I thought about rebelling many times. Sure, I gave up on numerous things, but as a result, I became successful.” As Sei-san spoke, I could tell there was no doubt in his mind that he was in the right. “Now I have an affluent lifestyle, and I’m moving up the company ladder. I can understand that my father was strict with me for the sake of my own happiness. Which is why I’ll do the same for you: I want to make you happy!”

He really means that. He seriously wishes for his daughter’s happiness. That’s what makes him so scary. People who have ill intentions are way easier to handle!

“Papa, everyone is different. Even if that method made you happy, that doesn’t mean it’ll work for me. I don’t think a life spent following someone else’s orders will lead to happiness.”

“Enough! I—”

“In the first place, are you truly happy?” Hoshimiya asked.

Caught off guard, Sei-san fell silent.

“Sure, things might be going well at your company, but your relationship with mama is terrible, and you two fight *all* the time. Even though we have money, we can’t call ourselves a proper family. And I hate you, papa. Are you really happy like this? Or are you just trying to convince yourself that you are?”

Sei-san’s expression crumpled.

“Aren’t you just acting like this because you don’t want to admit you were wrong?” she pressed.

“You—” he unwittingly yelled, but then exhaled to compose himself.

He’s really good at staying calm, so why the heck is he so stubborn?

Sei-san shrugged, his face still contorted with displeasure. “Then what else am I supposed to do? This is how I’ve always lived, and now I’m imitating my late father and controlling others as I please! This is the only way I know how to live,” he remarked brusquely.

Now, Hoshimiya began to yell. “If you don’t know, then you’ll just have to learn! Papa, you’re just scared to change! Even though you’re way older than me, you’re a big coward! You’re just forcing your way of life on me!”

She unleashed sixteen years’ worth of pent-up feelings onto him and stood up from her chair. Staring her father straight in the eyes, she declared, “I’m different from you! I’ll decide what my dreams are and who my friends are! Even if I suffer that way or don’t achieve happiness, I won’t regret it because I chose this path myself!”



Calm fell over the store once more. The jovial background music that filled the quiet felt out of place. Their argument had turned into a noise nuisance for the café, but the shopkeeper did not interject, most likely because we happened to be the only customers. Usually, there would be five or six other groups around this time.

After maintaining eye contact with Hoshimiya for a while, Sei-san let out a lethargic sigh. "I...see."

"Read this." Hoshimiya held out her novel to him.

"What's this?"

"It's a novel I wrote. Before you go deciding whether I have talent or not, read it and see for yourself."

Sei-san sniffed haughtily, but though he seemed unwilling, he took the book. "Very well. If you're going to be so insistent, then I'll read it."

"After you finish it, if you thought it was entertaining, then you have to accept it!" Hoshimiya said as if she had prepared that line all night.

Sei-san's expression remained unchanged. "Accept what?" he uttered dubiously.

She took a deep breath and squeezed my hand tightly. "Accept that I won't be your little puppet anymore."

He observed her face wordlessly for a while. "My puppet, huh?" He snorted, clearly miffed. "So if I don't accept your demands, will you refuse to return home?"

"W-Well... That would put me in a tight spot. I can't depend on my friends forever."

"Which means, regardless of what I choose, you'll be forced to come home," Sei-san stated impassively.

"Ugh." Hoshimiya had no counter.

"Oh well. I understand your demands." He tucked her manuscript under his arm and turned around. "Come. I'll allow your request. Of course, that doesn't

mean I'll acknowledge your novel."

Pale-faced, Hoshimiya blinked at Sei-san's back. I let go of her hand and gave her a gentle push. "Go get 'em!"

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Hikari."

Nanase and I gave her encouraging nods.

"Yeah!" She sprang up.

Sei-san bowed his head to the shopkeeper. "I apologize for the commotion," he said and left the store. Hoshimiya rushed out in pursuit, her footsteps thudding noisily behind her.

"Do you think everything will work out?" Nanase asked.

"Who knows. I doubt he'll go along with her request that easily, though," I replied. *Judging by his demeanor, at the very least, he won't dismiss her efforts without listening to her from now on. Plus, Hoshimiya has the willpower to oppose any unreasonable rules now.* "Well, it'll probably be fine."

Yes, Sei-san was the type of person who treated others like pawns on a chess board, but at the same time, he had once said, "People who can think for themselves are valuable." It might've been strange to hear coming from him, but it was precisely because he was skilled at giving instructions that he'd said that.

His humanity and parenting skills may be questionable, but he's definitely talented at his career. That aside, I still haven't forgiven him for failing me during my final interview. What? You think because I leaped through time, it doesn't matter anymore? Dumbass! That's not the issue here!

Chapter 3: Swimsuit Season with Fireworks, a Barbecue—and Love

Miori was upset with me because I hadn't kept in touch recently.

"Oh? Really? I don't particularly care if you don't need me around anymore," she said, the displeasure in her voice clearly apparent even through the phone.

"I said I'm sorry already. I told you what happened!" I replied. This incident had been a private matter for Hoshimiya, so even though I'd wanted to ask Miori for help, I couldn't because it wasn't my problem to talk about.

"Well, I understand...but it kinda pisses me off," she grumbled. I had just given her a brief rundown of the incident with Hoshimiya, which shouldn't have even registered as an issue for Miori. "So? What happened to Hikari-chan in the end? Can she go on the trip?"

"Yeah, apparently she managed to convince him."

Sei-san had admitted that Hoshimiya's novel was enjoyable. It was good enough to win a writing competition, after all, though I might've been biased. Due to her efforts, Hoshimiya had gained stronger leverage over Sei-san. She promised to improve her grades, and in exchange, he allowed her to continue writing novels as a hobby. In addition, instead of forcing her to find a different main career, he accepted her aspiration to become an author. Furthermore, he acknowledged that she could choose her own friends, and somehow the ocean trip got bundled in as part of their deal. But apparently, he still refused to move her curfew back for some reason.

Sei-san had lamented, "*My daughter is in her rebellious phase.*" What a riot!

"Sounds like it was resolved happily, then," Miori said.

"Yeah. When I first heard Hoshimiya had run away from home, I was worried how it would turn out, but I'm glad it went well for her."

I had been extremely relieved when she'd called me to report the outcome.

One week had passed since then. Our trip to the ocean was in two days. If I scrolled up in our group chat for the trip, I would find Hoshimiya's message saying, *"I can go!"* followed by a sticker of an anime character giving a thumbs-up. Our group was now lively with discussion about what we needed to bring and prepare.

"How're things going on your end?" I finally asked, having waffled over whether or not to do so. Ultimately, I figured it'd be weirder not to. There was one more reason I hadn't gone to Miori for advice: the girls' basketball team was in the midst of Interhigh prelims. Since she was a starting player, I hadn't wanted to give her one more thing to worry about.

"We lost; it was a complete defeat! National-level opponents are really strong," she said in a surprisingly light tone.

Our girls' team had made it all the way to Gunma Prefecture's Interhigh semifinals. Their opponent had been Endo High, a school that regularly competed at nationals. Our team was strong, but they had still been outclassed.

The day Hoshimiya had run away from home was the day before their semifinals. I'd thought Miori would be depressed about losing, but it sounded like she had already moved past it.

"We're going to win next time. You'd better help me practice," she said, frustration tinting her tone. However, she was not discouraged, and instead she had her eyes fixed on the future, brimming with optimism.

"If I feel like it."

"Nope! If I say you'll train with me, then you'll train with me. We're partners in your plan, right?"

"Basketball isn't included in that agreement."

"Then help me out for old times' sake! Or are you going to abandon your precious childhood friend? You have few enough friends as it is already."

"Okay, okay. I don't mind helping, but throwing in insults was uncalled for!" *I feel like Miori has been very demanding lately... Was she always like this? Up until recently, she was more coolheaded and kept some distance between us.*

"By the way, how did the boys' team do?"

I'd heard from Reita that the soccer team had lost before summer vacation even started. The boys' basketball team had won two games and were subsequently preparing for their third match when our break began.

"You didn't hear from Tatsuya-kun? They lost on the first day of vacation."

"Oh, I see," I remarked. *Looks like that didn't change even after I got a do-over. Well, not that I'd be an important factor. The other clubs might've run into the same results as before too, but I have no way to be sure of that since I don't remember what happened to them.* "Then does that mean you're all free from club activities for a while?"

"Yeah. This trip will be a good change of pace for us sports folks," she said.

And most importantly, as the event planner, I'm thrilled everyone can go without issue!

"I can't wait!" she exclaimed, her voice oozing excitement.

"Me too," I said. Miori usually spoke with an even and dispassionate tone, so it was atypical for her to blatantly show enthusiasm. Hearing her so energetic put me in an upbeat mood as well.

After we finished chatting, I took a bath, brushed my teeth, and threw myself on my bed. There were still two whole days until our trip, but I was already bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. I forced my eyes shut, trying to suppress my eagerness.

The night before our trip, I had been so restless that I hadn't slept well. *I'm acting like a little kid!* I scolded myself, dragging myself out of my home still half asleep.

Over the break, I had met everyone a few times individually, but it had been a long time since all of us had gathered together. We all lived near different stations, so we'd decided to meet up at Takasaki Station first before boarding the bullet train.

"Morning. The weather's nice." Miori greeted me with a wave when I stepped outside.

“Wow, you waited for me?” I remarked.

“We’re going together anyway, so might as well. Since I’m your childhood friend, should I have woken you up instead?”

“Cut it out! Only heroines in stories do that,” I replied fearfully.

Miori giggled lightheartedly. “Don’t the childhood friends who act like that in stories tend to lose?”

D-Don’t insult my favorite type of heroine! In the past, I’d been fond of childhood friend heroines (who always lose) in anime and light novels, so her words hit deep. *I’m not going to tell her that, though, because she’ll definitely tease me about it!*

In contrast to my internal grumblings, Miori began to stroll with enthusiasm. “All righty, let’s go! All aboard!”

Though she’d bothered to wait for me outside my house, she still proceeded ahead as per her own whims. It filled me with nostalgia. “It is what it is,” I muttered. Just like I had in the past, I obediently followed after Miori.

We took the train and disembarked at Takasaki Station. On the ride there, I’d listened to Miori’s endless stories about her club. When we exited the station, the group had already gathered in front of the display board.

“Good mooorning!” Miori waved a hand vigorously at them. They all simultaneously turned in our direction.

“Ah! Miorin! Natsu! Good mooorning!” The first to brighten up was Uta. She raised both hands and waved back ardently.

“Hey, it’s been a while.” Reita shot us a gentle smile from beside her.

“Wassup.” Tatsuya raised his hand listlessly and let out a big yawn. “I’m damn tired.”

“Hey, you two. You made it.” Hondo-san looked up from her smartphone from where she was leaning against the wall.

“Mioriiin!” Uta tackled Miori, embracing her hard. Miori patted Uta’s head as if she were soothing a child.

At the same time, Tatsuya slung his arm around my shoulders. “I’m so sleepy... Can’t stand up...”

“Don’t use me as a cane!” I said in protest. Though I worked out often, Tatsuya was much brawnier and taller than me. *He’s gotta be over seventy kilograms; he’s freaking heavy!* “Besides, why’re you so sleepy?” *Well, I’m probably just as tired, but I’m hiding it.*

“Tatsuya’s like a little kid, so he can never sleep the night before a fun event,” Reita explained.

“Shut up, Reita. Stop blabbing!” Tatsuya seemed kinda embarrassed, but I was in the same boat as him so I didn’t tease.

Reita checked the time. “It’s almost time... Only Nanase-san and Hoshimiya-san are missing now.”

“Oh, there they are. Looks like they just got here,” Tatsuya said.

I followed his gaze and saw Nanase and Hoshimiya exit the gates with suitcases rolling behind them. They noticed us staring at them and waved lightly.

“Sorry! Are we late?” Hoshimiya asked, clapping her hands in front of her apologetically.

“Nope, you’re right on time. Don’t worry,” Reita replied.

“We scheduled our meetup so we’d have time to spare before the train,” I reassured her.

Nanase stood behind Hoshimiya, holding her forehead as she apologized. “I’m sorry. Hikari couldn’t decide what clothes to pick, so we lost track—”

“Yu-Yuino-chan?! You promised you wouldn’t tell them!”

The rest of us broke out into cheerful laughter. *We haven’t gathered like this in a long time, but the ambience is still the same. The only difference is that Miori and Hondo-san are here too.* I glanced over at Hondo-san. She already had her eyes fixed on me, so our gazes met.

“Haibara-kun, do you like the ocean?” she asked, expressionless.

“Huh? Well, yeah, I guess I do?”

“I see. Same here,” she said and went back to her phone.

Is she...the type of person that lives in her own little world?!

We all bought our tickets and boarded the bullet train. It would take us about an hour to get to Niigata. We hadn't reserved any seats, but luckily there weren't many passengers. We flipped one set of seats to face the set behind it. Unfortunately, even doing that, each side would only fit six, so our group would have to be split by the aisle.

Since there were eight of us, we naturally kept the aisle seats empty. We grouped up based on the order we'd boarded the train, with Reita, Nanase, Miori, and Tatsuya on the left side of the aisle and me, Hondo-san, Hoshimiya, and Uta on the right.

I felt somewhat awkward because not only was I the only guy on my side, but I was also sitting in front of Hondo-san. Uta sat next to me, and Hoshimiya was diagonally across. The three girls appeared to be good friends already, conversing excitedly. Hondo-san's expression didn't change much, but she turned out to be fairly chatty.

Missing my chance to join in their conversation, I stared out the window. *Man, Uta and Hoshimiya aren't throwing a line to include me... I'm so sad... Do I have to butt in on my own? Of course I do.*

I glanced at the others across the aisle. Reita and Miori were chatting amicably. Tatsuya hadn't eaten breakfast yet, so he was chowing down on a bento he'd bought at the station. “I'm impressed by your appetite,” Nanase commented with admiration, observing him.

They look like they're having fun. While I was lost in my thoughts, I suddenly felt gazes focused on me. “Hmm?” I looked back to my side of the aisle to find Hoshimiya and Uta staring at me for some reason. “What's up?” I asked.

Their eyes widened with a start.

“N-Nothing's up. Right, Uta-chan?”

“Y-Yeah. What Hikarin said!”

The heck? I hadn’t been paying attention to their conversation, so I didn’t know what the appropriate response to their fishy behavior was. I cocked my head in confusion and looked at Hondo-san. She shrugged at me, emotionless as usual. The atmosphere got awkward, and we were visited by good ol’ silence.

“Hey,” Hondo-san abruptly said, her eyes fixed straight on me. “What kind of person are you, Haibara-kun?”

Are you...really asking me that? “What kind of person am I? Err, I’m not sure.” At a complete loss, I looked to Hoshimiya for help.

She thought for a moment with a small hum. “Well, he’s 178 centimeters tall, he weighs 65 kilograms, his favorite foods are ramen and omurice, and his name has the kanji for ‘summer’ because his birthday is August 28. His hobbies are reading and working out, and he’s particularly skilled at basketball. He’s also good at studying, with his best subjects being physics and math. His family...” Hoshimiya began listing facts about me without pause.

I know I answered these questions a week or so ago, but I’m surprised she remembers that much about me!

“Hikarin... Why do you know so much about him?” Uta asked, head quizzically tilted to the side.

Hoshimiya froze. “Um... Uh, I asked him a little bit of this and that the other day. Right?”

“Yeah. Stuff happened, and we wound up talking about a lot,” I answered vaguely, unsure how much of her incident I could divulge.

“Hmm,” Uta uttered, dubious about our nebulous replies.

All she’s doing is shooting me a confused look, but why do I feel a bit scared?

“I know he’s smart,” Hondo-san said. “I see his name listed as rank number one on the bulletin board after every exam. And I heard from Miori that he’s good at basketball. I also heard stories from when he was a kid too.”

“For real? I told her not to blab about me to anyone!” My face contorted with distress. *My childhood stories are just an embarrassing part of my past! They*

already know about my high school debut, so it's not much worse if they find out more about my dark history, but it's still embarrassing!

"Miori seems like she has the most fun when she's talking about Haibara-kun, so it's hard to stop her," Hondo-san said nonchalantly.

Well, she did always enjoy playing with me a lot...

"I've heard a bunch of stories about kid Natsu from Miorin too!" Uta grinned mischievously, giggling.

That girl... Stop telling people left and right about my past! I glowered at Miori from across the aisle, but she didn't notice, absorbed as she was in conversation with Reita.

"Stories about li'l Natsuki-kun?" Hoshimiya questioned, highly intrigued.

Hey! Haven't I told you enough over the phone?! I had a bad feeling where they were going with this, so I struck preemptively. "Okay! We're done with this topic! That's a wrap!"

Having made my dislike for the subject clear, Uta and Hoshimiya shared a look and giggled. But Hondo-san remained impassive and came at me with another question. "Haibara-kun, you're Miori's childhood friend, right?"

"Well, I guess so... We've more or less known each other since kindergarten." *Though, at the same time, we pretty much only hung out during elementary school as classmates, so calling us childhood friends is a huge overstatement. We've just been aware of each other's existence for a long time, that's all.*

Hondo-san suddenly pushed her face near mine.

"Wh-What?" I stuttered. Her beautiful face filling my vision gave me the jitters. *Why are all the girls here so gosh darn cute? I'm gonna be charmed! Please, quit it!* I felt my own face get hot.

"Haibara-kun, what do you think of Miori?" she whispered in my ear so Miori couldn't hear. However, Hoshimiya and Uta were close enough to hear, and they stared at me intently.

"What do I think? I don't know what to say... She's a good friend, though we didn't talk much during middle school. Anyway, she's done a lot for me since

she's so annoyingly helpful," I replied honestly in a hushed tone. *She probably wanted to know if I like Miori romantically, but if I answer this way, she'll see that there's nothing like that going on between us. A lot of people are doubtful whenever I say we're just childhood friends.*

"Hmm... Really?"

"Really. I don't feel anything else besides that."

Hondo-san's eyes bored into me for a while until she finally backed off, satisfied. She straightened up and then leaned back into her seat. *I feel like I was about to get cross-examined, but looks like I made it out safely.*

The moment I thought that, she followed up with another pointed question. "Then are you and Uta dating?"

My face went stiff. "N-No..."



Compared to my half-baked response, Uta interjected with fervent panic. “Wh-What are you saying, Seri?! I told you we’re not dating yet!”

“Oh, right. You’re not dating yet.”

As soon as Uta digested Hondo-san’s calm reply, her face rapidly flushed red.

“So you’re not dating yet... Not yet, huh? I see, *not yet*,” Hondo-san repeated again.

“Seri?! Stop it!” Uta cried, on the verge of tears and scarlet up to the tips of her ears.

Not gonna lie, but I’m pretty embarrassed too. Leave the cute thing alone!

“Sorry, sorry. I had a little too much fun there,” Hondo-san apologized, her lips ever so slightly curling up.

Hoshimiya watched us, wearing her usual smile. *I... I can’t glean any emotion from her...but she seems kinda scary right now. Why?*

“You know, I saw you guys during the summer festival,” Hondo-san explained.

“Oh, makes sense,” I murmured. *If she saw Uta and me walking around during Tanabata, it’s no surprise she’d assume we’re dating. We were fairly flirty too... Even I was aware of how we must’ve looked to others.*

“Huh? Seri, you were there too?! I didn’t see you! You should’ve called out to me.”

“Uh, no way I could’ve. I mean... I saw you two in front of your house, Uta.”

Really? She saw us in front of Uta’s house? Wait... In front of Uta’s house?! That’s when...

“Natsu.” I remembered her whisper. *“This is how I feel.”*

Does that mean she saw all that?!

Hondo-san quietly looked back and forth between Uta and me. “Um, sorry.”

“Did something happen?” Hoshimiya asked, a smile still pasted on her face.

“N-Not much! Natsu just walked me home,” Uta replied, trying to dodge the question. She looked to me for help. “Right?! ”

I nodded in agreement.

“Really? Is that what happened? You two went to the Tanabata Festival together, right? I’m so jealous,” Hoshimiya said, gazing out the window.

If memory served, she had gone to Kanagawa Prefecture with her family during that time. At any rate, Uta and I had managed to quell the storm, though our hearts were racing.

The four of us fell silent again, the previous dilemma returning. The other group was alive with chatter, making our dead air stand out all the more. *Wh-What should I do? And why aren’t Uta and Hoshimiya talking much? They don’t look like they’re in bad moods, but they seem kinda fidgety. Why is that?*

Anyway, I want to liven things up a bit. I’ve always been bad at small talk, but now I’m way worse with a new person here. Come on, it’s just the nerves... Remember Miori’s advice! The key to communication is interest in the other person.

“Hondo-san, you’re in the light music club, right?” I asked, hoping to get to know her better. *Come to think of it, she’s been asking me questions all day, so this is probably the right move.*

“Yeah. I’m surprised you knew,” she replied with a nod.

“Miori talks about you sometimes. She mentioned that you play the guitar.” Once the topic turned to music, Hondo-san’s tone blatantly became more energetic. Her facial expression didn’t change much, but it was easy to tell. *She must like music a lot.* “Actually, I’ve played the guitar before.”

“Huh? Really?” She leaned forward, her excitement and interest showing through.

Her face was once again too close for comfort, so I reflexively backed away, but I somehow continued the conversation. “I just messed around a little. I can barely play a power chord.”

I recalled my period in college when I’d tried everything I could alone. I was a huge rock fan, so of course I tried my hand at the star instrument in a band—the guitar. I’d always looked up to Jimi Hendrix, so I bought a stratocaster. I ended up getting discouraged before I got any good, though, and it wound up

abandoned in the corner of my room.

Ah, the memories. Maybe I would've kept practicing if I had people to make a band with... No, that's just an excuse. After all, my university had a light music club. I simply didn't have the grit to take the dive.

"Really? Want me to teach you?" Hondo-san offered, but then remembered something. "Haibara-kun, you're not part of a club, right? Wanna join the light music club? We always welcome new members with open arms."

"W-Wow, you're coming on strong..."

"Ah ha ha! Seri loves music, after all!" Uta cut in, noticing me bending away.

"Also, just call me by my given name. I hate how stuffy my surname sounds," Hondo-san said.

"Would you prefer Serika-san?" I asked.

"Drop the 'san' too."

"Serika, then?"

"Yep."

"Cool, you can call me just Natsuki too."

"M'kay. Nice to meet you again, Natsuki."

Wow... How did we naturally start using each other's given name all friendly like this? Is this just how extroverts build rapport with each other? I feel like it's been ages, but I still don't have the balls to call Hoshimiya by her given name. Well, I don't overthink around Serika, so it's easy to go along with her. If this were Hoshimiya, though, I might blush just saying her name.

Hoshimiya... I mean, Hikari... Hikari. Yeah, I don't think I can do it. Uta and I started out by using our given names, so I don't have a problem with it, but I've been using "Hoshimiya" for so long that it feels really embarrassing to switch.

Without thinking, I glanced at Hoshimiya. She was looking at me. Before I could avert my eyes, she quickly turned away, returning her attention to her phone as if nothing had happened. *Is it just me, or is Hoshimiya acting kinda suspicious today?*

“Hey, Seri. Natsu likes rock music too,” Uta said.

“I heard from Miori. Who do you like in particular?”

“My favorite’s gotta be Alexandros,” Uta replied.

“I thought she was asking me,” I remarked.

“Uta, I already know what your favorite band is,” Serika said.

“Ah ha ha! I’m just kidding; it was a joke. If I remember correctly, Natsu likes Bump and Elle!”

I liked pretty much everything, but when it came to J-rock, those two bands were my favorites. There was also One Ok Rock, UVERworld, Asian Kung-Fu Generation, Radwimps, The Oral Cigarettes, 04 Limited Sazabys, My First Story... There would be no end if I started listing bands, though!

“Ohhh, nice taste. I like Elle too. ‘Kaze no Hi’ is a good one,” Serika said.

“Yeah! That song has great lyrics,” I said in agreement.

“Right? Recently, I’ve been getting back into Japanese songs that have lyrics that really hit me.”

“I’ve been hooked on old Western music lately myself.”

If I had to say, I’d made my return to the old hits these days, seeing that I had leaped seven years back in time. I couldn’t listen to any music that was new from my perspective, and because I pretty much knew all the current popular stuff already, I was getting more interested in older songs in search of the unknown. During this period of my life the first time around, I hadn’t delved too deep into the classics, but they were definitely the ultimate rock out there.

I began with the group that had changed the age of rock, The Beatles, then moved on to Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan. Punk rock had the Sex Pistols; hard rock had Led Zeppelin; heavy metal had Black Sabbath; and of course, I couldn’t forget Nirvana. There were many other great bands buried in the vast history of rock, but these were the ones that I had retained so far.

“Oh, I getcha. I was nuts about Nirvana a little while ago,” Serika said.

That’s quite a rugged hobby for a high school girl. Looks like we can talk the

same language more than I expected.

“Do you like *Nevermind* too?” I asked. *Nevermind* was Nirvana’s album that had experienced explosive sales in its time.

She nodded. “It’s way too famous not to... Y’know, you’re pretty well versed.”

“I’ll listen to anything. What can I say? I’m an omnivore.”

And just like that, Serika and I became engrossed in our conversation. I was having so much fun talking about music that, when I realized it, we had left Hoshimiya and Uta out. Uta was somewhat familiar with the topic, so she occasionally threw in her two cents, but Hoshimiya was completely in the dark. All she could do was nod and make a small interjection every now and then.

I looked at her and put my hands together apologetically. “Sorry. I got too excited.”

“Don’t worry about it. Natsuki-kun, you have a lot of hobbies,” she replied.

“My hobbies are just like my taste in music... I dabble in a wide variety of stuff, but it’s just surface-level knowledge.” My random interests hadn’t been very useful in the past, but it felt like they’d been helpful during my second chance at youth. My passion for music had, after all, been a good way to bond with Serika.

I think she’s opened up a lot. Though, I still can’t read her expressions at all. It’ll be okay; I did get better at understanding Nanase over time. Wait... Maybe Nanase was just being formal with me when we first met. She’s actually been very expressive lately.

“Oh, we’re almost there. Our stop’s next,” Hoshimiya said.

“Huh? For real?” I asked.

“Time flies when we’re having fun,” Serika commented.

“Ah ha ha! Natsu and Seri were hyped up the whole time.”

In any case, I had successfully completed my mission (if you could call it that) to become comfortable talking to Serika. *It would’ve sucked if I made things awkward, so I’m glad we hit it off early on in the trip.*

We took a short break once we got off at Niigata Station before boarding a bus. We then headed to the cottage we'd reserved to drop off our luggage first. It was a slight detour compared to beelining it straight for the ocean from the train station, but the cottage was within walking distance to the beach, so I figured it'd be better to go there first.

Though I had asked everyone for their opinions, most of the planning was done by me, so I was pretty nervous. I'd done a decent amount of random wandering alone before, but this was the first time I'd ever been on a group outing apart from school field trips. I felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility when I imagined how everyone's future depended on my decisions.

"What are you worrying about? You did a ton of research, so it'll all be fine," Miori said. Right when I was feeling touched by her concern, she slapped my back hard.

"You know... It hurts when you do that," I groaned.

"Your childhood friend is cheering you up. Be grateful!"

"I don't need that served with a side of violence." I was sitting in a window seat on the shaking bus with Miori next to me. *We're on a special trip—you should sit next to Reita to continue whatever conversation you had on the bullet train!*

"Are you and Serika getting along?"

"You could say that. I can hold a conversation with her now, since we have similar interests."

"That's good. You probably didn't notice because we were behind you, but I got Serika to switch seats with me. Originally, I would've ended up in front of you."

"What? Were you fussing over me?" *Did you do that so Serika and I would get closer?*

"Nope. Obviously, I did that so I could sit with Reita-kun!"

Uh-huh, so she says, but sounds dubious. I know how meddling her personality is. I feel like she's been prioritizing supporting me over her own love life too much lately. I mean, look, she's sitting next to me right now. Well, I do feel relaxed with Miori around.

"Natsuki, this is our stop, right?" Reita asked.

"Oh, you're right. My bad. I got lost in conversation," I said, thankful that he'd caught my mistake. We hurried off the bus and found ourselves on a straight path that screamed "countryside."

"Ah! Look! We can see the ocean from here!" Hoshimiya shouted happily.

I followed the direction of her finger. Though it was a moderate distance away, the ocean certainly was visible in the gaps between the trees and houses.

"Ohhh! I'm gettin' pumped! Look!" Clearly excited, Tatsuya slung his arm around my shoulders.

"Hey! It's freaking hot, man," I said in complaint. *It's already boiling as it is, and you think I'd want a gross dude's armpit on me? Though, the heat's much more bearable today. Maybe Gunma's just too hot.*

"Natsuki, this is the place, right?" Reita asked, pointing at his phone's map application.

"Yeah." I nodded. *Thank you, Reita... You're such a capable man.*

"Y'know, there's no one else here," Uta said, looking around the vicinity.

"It's because this road mostly has ryokan, guest houses, and cottages," I replied. There were a few people who looked like tourists here and there, but that was about it. The residential area was elsewhere, so there weren't many locals hanging around here. It would be more crowded if we went back towards the station.

Hoshimiya giggled uncontrollably. "Yuino-chaaan! Yaaay!"

"Wh-What is it, Hikari? I don't think I can keep up with your enthusiasm," Nanase replied.

Everyone was quite excited now that we'd seen the ocean, but among the eight of us, Hoshimiya was clearly the most ecstatic. She had been beaming

nonstop this whole time. *Well, she did go through a lot just to get here. I'm glad being here makes her smile so wide.*

“Natsu?”

I'd been staring at Hoshimiya, but Uta's voice returned me to my senses. “Y-Yeah? What's up?”

“Nah... It's nothing! I can't wait to hit the beach!”

We walked a few minutes and soon arrived at our cottage. The first thing that stood out was the spacious terrace. It was a western-style building made of wood, with quite an impressive ambience. It had a large parking spot too. *I bet a lot of people drive up here. If this were before I got my do-over, I'd have a driver's license. Does that car parked there belong to the owner?*

“Hi there! Welcome!” When we walked up to the door, the landlord came out to greet us and give a tour of the property. After he showed us the facilities in the bathroom and kitchen, and noted some other small things for us, he gave us the key. “Great! You're staying one night, right? Enjoy!” the middle-aged man said. Then, he got in his car and drove away.

“Whoa! The living room is huge!” Uta dived onto the long sofa and flopped there.

I looked around the building one more time. The staircase was right in front of the entrance, and to the right was a sliding door that led to a large, unpartitioned room. There were two fairly wide sofas that faced each other, sandwiching a low table. There was also a TV in the front of the room and a wooden table lined with chairs.

I initially thought only the kitchen and bathroom areas were separated by doors from the rest of the first floor, but there was another room in the back. It was a moderately spacious eight-tatami-mat room—a nice Japanese-style room perfect for us to hang out in.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, where there were ten identical small rooms that each had two beds, a small table, and a chair. *Looks like we can sleep two people per room tonight.*

After I confirmed that the cottage's layout matched the information listed

online, I returned to the first floor. Our luggage was piled in the corner of the room, and the others were relaxing on the sofas. The air conditioner had rapidly cooled the area, and it now felt nice and cool inside.

“We talked and decided we’d take a breather before going to the beach,” Reita told me.

“Sure.” I nodded. *If we push ourselves without any rest in this scorching weather, Nanase will collapse. Plus, anyone could get heatstroke, not just her. I’d better keep an eye on everyone’s condition.*

“What’s the plan for today? Just see the ocean?” Tatsuya asked.

“We can go for a swim; buy meat, veggies, and whatnot at the supermarket; and then have a barbecue on the terrace,” I replied. “After that, I guess we’ll wash up and sleep.”

“Sounds good. I’m getting pumped!”

Those were my plans for the first day. If we still had the energy, I figured we could play board games or do something else.

Tatsuya suddenly stood up with vigor and loudly declared, “Righto! We took a ten-minute break already, so let’s get moving!” He grabbed his bag with his swimsuit and beach stuff, and promptly exited the room.

For the guy who struggled the most to scrape enough dough together for this trip, he sure seems the most gung ho. The rest of us also left our large luggage behind, only grabbing the things we needed for the beach, and left the cottage.

I exited the cottage last, making sure that the door was properly locked. When I turned back to the rest, Tatsuya, Uta, and Hoshimiya had disappeared. *What the... I can get the basketballs-for-brains duo, but Hoshimiya’s gone too?*

Holding a parasol over her head, Nanase shrugged at me with an exasperated look. “They left already. And yes, Hikari went with them too.”

“Do those three want to walk all the way there?” I questioned. It was only ten minutes on foot, but that was also a ten whole minutes spent under the blazing sun. If we waited a bit, a bus that would take us close to the beach would come.

“They were so excited they just couldn’t wait,” Nanase said.

“For the record, we *did* tell them that we’re gonna take the bus,” Miori piped up. The two girls smiled wryly.

“Aren’t you the type of kid to run down with them?” I asked.

“Hey now, how long ago do you think that was?” Miori retorted, smacking my head. “Still, it threw me off to see Hikari-chan that eager.”

“Hikari has always loved the ocean far more than your average person,” Nanase said, gazing into the distance.

“Welp, let’s get to the bus stop. It should be here soonish,” Serika said matter-of-factly. With that, we departed from our cottage.

The first thing we did once we arrived at the ocean was change into our swimsuits at the beach house. Incidentally, Tatsuya and the others got there at pretty much the same time as the rest of us. Though we’d waited for the bus, driving was still faster than going on foot. The three who’d dashed off without us were still in high spirits, though, so I figured all’s well that ends well.

Currently, us three boys were waiting in front of the beach house for the girls to finish changing. *Guys are faster at changing, after all.*

“It’s finally here! The moment of truth!” Tatsuya swung his fist around with a fierce expression as he roared into the air.

“Humph. I’ve already finished running simulations of their swimsuits in my brain.”

R-Reita is broken... Nah, he’s always had this side to him. Underneath his nonchalant attitude is a love for dirty talk. There are some things he only expresses to us guys.

“Hey, you! Say something too. Aren’t you excited? Riiight?” Tatsuya said.

The two slung their arms over me, leaning on me with their naked upper bodies. *You guys are way too hyped about this.* “Well, yeah, I want to see them, but...”

When I imagined Hoshimiya in a swimsuit, I could feel the blood gather in a certain...unspeakable place. *C’mon, I mean, they’re huge! She looks slim in her*

usual outfits, but a swimsuit will be fairly... N-No, calm down, me! I should imagine Uta in her swimsuit. If it's Uta, then... No, I still want to see it! Of course I'd want to see her in a never-before-seen form! I mean, I do like her!

Though my mind was running wild, I somehow maintained my composure on the outside. The three of us must've looked like stupid boys getting suspiciously riled up, though, and right then, our long-awaited moment came.

"Heyo! Did you guys wait long?" Uta ran over in a red and white checkered bikini. Relatively speaking, it wasn't *that* revealing, but beholding more of her ivory skin than usual dazzled my eyes.

Dude. She's so cute. She's super adorable! At my limit for directly looking at her, I averted my eyes to where Hoshimiya was.

"Th-Thanks for waiting." She waved shyly. I could see a deep ravine and two ample mounds on her chest. They looked like they would spill out of the two thin pieces of cloth that covered them. A large skirt-looking piece of fabric was wrapped around the narrow point of her waist.

Is that a sarong? Underneath that thing is a swimsuit bottom, right? The image of Hoshimiya in her underwear in my room flashed through my mind. *It's hard enough to believe that she stayed over at my house. Maybe that moment was just a fever dream.*

"Hikari, did you put on sunscreen?" Nanase asked, acting as her childhood friend's guardian as always. She was wearing a black bikini.

Is that the swimsuit she bought when we went shopping together? Wow, she's showing the most skin of them all! As soon as I thought that, she put on a rash guard. But that actually made her appear more erotic because I could catch a meager glimpse of her bikini bottom. She was tall, which meant there was more of her long legs generously exposed to all. I unwittingly swallowed a mouthful of saliva.

"Reita-kuun! How do I look?" Miori smiled with satisfaction as she showed him her stylish, predominantly yellow swimwear.

When she's in a swimsuit, I can tell she's unexpectedly well-endowed... She's definitely an athlete—look at those tight muscles... It kinda pisses me off how

cute she is. No, I think I'm actually feeling irritated by the facts: Miori is cute.

"It looks good on you. Very cute," Reita complimented her, wearing a mild smile.

"Natsuki." I turned around to see Serika inching up close to me. She was wearing a flashy, rainbow-patterned swimsuit that fit her image as a fashionable high school gal. She examined my body up and down and then touched my abs. "Wow... You're super ripped. I guess you *did* say your hobby is working out."

"Yeah. I just do it to kill time," I replied. Though I kept my tone impassive, I was actually thrilled to hear her praise my muscles. *Ever since break started, I've been doing a special workout menu focused on my abs. That's right! All of my efforts were for this very day!*

"Let's find a spot to claim first," Reita suggested.

"There are a ton of people here," Miori remarked.

"Doesn't that place look good?" Hoshimiya said.

"Hikari, put your valuables in a locker," Nanase chided.

"Come on already! I want to hurry up and swim!" urged Uta.

No one else besides Serika brought up my abs, which made me a bit glum. *Well, Reita and Tatsuya are pretty muscular themselves, so it's not like I even stand out.*

My wallowing aside, the beach was teeming with people, but we managed to secure an area to lay out our picnic blanket. I opened the beach umbrella that I'd purchased with my hard-earned cash and made a nice space to relax in the shade. *This was a bulky thing to lug around, but I'm glad I brought it! The spots with any natural cover have been snatched up by other groups already.*

When we finished setting up our base, Tatsuya and Uta rushed towards the ocean.

"Hell yeah! Chaaarge!" he shouted.

"I'm coming too!" she yelled. "Yaaaaaay!"

They leaped into the water, creating a big splash where they landed.

“Miori, let’s go too,” Reita said.

“Yeah!” she replied.

He pulled her hand, and they joined the other two. *I’m glad to see they’re getting along. They look like a couple walking on the sand.*

“Are those two already going out?” Hoshimiya asked from behind me, staring at Reita and Miori.

“I haven’t heard anything...but they look way closer than last time, right?”

“Yeah. Even if they’re not dating, it looks like it’s just a matter of time.”

She was leaning in because she was whispering, which put her way too close to me. I was nervous that our shoulders might touch—I was definitely not mentally prepared for skin-to-skin contact with her in a swimsuit. Suddenly, our upper arms brushed against each other.

“Oh... S-Sorry.” Hoshimiya rapidly backed away.

You didn’t have to distance yourself that quickly. “N-Nah... Uh, sorry.”

Nanase interrupted our awkward stammering. “You two should get going too. I’ll stay here and watch our stuff.”

My heart was pounding like a drum, but I managed to keep my cool and reply. “Thanks... You sure?”

“We put our valuables in the lockers, but it’s still better for someone to stay behind, right? If I frolic around right from the start, my stamina won’t hold up. It’s important to pace yourself, you know?” Nanase sounded like she was lecturing us about how to run a marathon.

Serika was seated beside her, so I looked to her next. “What about you, Serika?”

“I’ll go after I blow up my swimming ring,” she replied and began breathing air into her doughnut-shaped swim ring.

“Okay. Hold down the fort, guys,” I said.

Hoshimiya and I walked away from our comfortable blanket and parasol base,

sediment crunching under our feet. On our way down to the shore, I saw the heartwarming scene of children playing in the sand. Suddenly, Hoshimiya grabbed my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“Hoshimiya?” I questioned, turning around to face her. She let go, bashfully searching for the right words. “Is something wrong?”

“Um, err...” Her voice shyly trailed off, and her cheeks were tinged red. “My swimsuit.”

“Uh-huh?”

“What...do you think of it?”

Taken aback by the unexpected and very blunt question, my brain stopped functioning. I froze, gawking at her in surprise. I let the flow of the moment take me, and my true feelings came out. “It’s... It’s pretty. It looks super good on you.”

Hoshimiya flushed a deeper shade of red, embarrassed, causing my face to burn up too. The sun was beating down on us, so we were hot enough as it was, but I felt my body temperature shoot up even more. *I’m going to suffer heatstroke if you keep this up. Please cut me some slack!*

“Natsuki-kun... I think you look cool today. You’re really toned... It’s manly,” she murmured, her face now bright crimson.

If... If you tell me that, then I’m going to fall for you, hard! I feel like I just got violently beaten up in the name of praise. Stop whacking people out of left field! We both fell silent. *What is this? Why do I feel so embarrassed?*

“W-We should get going! Sorry for stopping you randomly!” Unable to bear the awkward silence, Hoshimiya ran towards the ocean.

“Wait! Hoshimiya?!” I called after her. She slipped on the sandy beach and fell over magnificently. I ran up to her in a panic.

“A-Ah ha ha... I-I’m fine. Totally fine.”

“Here.” I offered her my hand. She took it, and I pulled her up.

“Th-Thanks,” she said, now covered in sand. She whimpered, a displeased look spreading across her face, but said nothing more.

Nothing to say now that you've exposed yourself as a klutz? You're too damn adorable!

"Heeey! Natsu! Hikarin! Over here!" Uta yelled, wildly waving her hands by the water's edge. Miori and Reita were having fun spraying water on each other nearby. Tatsuya was nowhere in sight, but he was probably off swimming somewhere on his own.

"Let's go, Hoshimiya."

Today was a day that Hoshimiya had seized with her own two hands. She was here because she had fought without giving up on her dreams and her friends.

"Yeah!"

That was why I hoped her day would be filled with joy.

The time had come for us to go all out at the beach.

"Yo, Natsuki! Let's compete to see who can reach that rock first!" Tatsuya challenged.

"Well, sure, I guess. But are you even good at swimming?" I asked.

"Yeah, man. No way I'm gonna lose in a swimming match!"

"I'll go over there to be the ref, then!" Uta exclaimed. "Good luck, Natsu!"

"Hey! What about me?! C'mon, cheer me on too!" Tatsuya grouched.

"Ah ha ha! Sorry! I'm on Natsu's side!"

When we were in the water, Tatsuya growled, "Y-You're not doing too shabby, Natsuki."

"Uh, I haven't done anything yet, though..."

We raced through the water...

"Ahhh. It feels so good to just let the waves carry you," I said, floating comfortably.

“Don’t just bum around in the swim ring. Time to sink!”

“What the— Miori?! You idiot! Glub...glub.”

“Mwa ha ha! It’s mine now!”

Miori had dunked me in the water and commandeered the swim ring for herself...

“Waaait! Natsu!” Uta screamed suddenly.

“Whoa! Where the heck did you get that from?” I yelled. She was toting a water gun.

“Bought it at a store! Peace was never an option! Take this!!!”

“Ow, ow, ow! Hey, that actually hurts! The pressure on that thing is crazy!”

Uta started using me as a human target...

“Oh, Haibara-kun. Are you resting as well?” Nanase asked me.

“If I don’t take short breaks occasionally, my body won’t make it through the whole day,” I replied.

She giggled. “You *have* been quite fired up. It’s fairly unusual. Aren’t you typically more composed?”

“I’m well aware that I’ve been infected by everyone else’s energy.”

“Be sure to drink water so you don’t collapse,” she said. “Come, I’ve prepared plenty of cold drinks in the cooler.”

“I can always count on you, Nanase. You really are like a mom everyone can depend on.”

“Who’re you calling a mom?” she quipped. “My hands are full taking care of my one and only daughter, Hikari.”

“Doesn’t that still make you a mom?”

I watched everyone else have fun as I relaxed under the parasol with Nanase...

“Hey, guys. Wanna go ride on a banana boat?” Uta asked a few of us.

“Huh? They have those here? That sounds super hype!” Tatsuya exclaimed.

“What’s a banana boat?” Hoshimiya asked.

“When you see one, you’ll understand. We ride on a banana-shaped floatie while getting pulled by a motorboat,” Reita explained. “It’s free, so who wants to go?”

“I... I think I’m good,” she answered. “It sounds kinda scary.”

“I’m in; sounds fun!” Miori piped up. “What about you?” she asked me.

“Course I’m down.” I said. “Looks like it’s me, Tatsuya, Uta, Miori, and Reita?”

“Woo-hoo! Let’s gooo!” cheered Uta.

We rode on a banana boat together. Uta sat behind me and shook my shoulders, and I fell off...

“Why the hell does yakisoba at the beach taste so damn good?!” Tatsuya exclaimed.

“Don’t forget the curry. Even though it’s gotta be from a ready-made box,” Reita added.

“Yeah, well, for me, ramen’s where it’s at—a bold and classic shoyu ramen. This stuff’s the best,” I said.

“It’s that effect, yeah? What’s it called again?” Tatsuya reflected. “You know, the ocean power effect.”

“Not even close, dude.” I remarked. “Are you thinking of the placebo effect?”

“Yeah, that! Big brain as always, Natsuki.”

Reita, Tatsuya, and I ate lunch at the beach house while making dumb small talk...

“What’re you doing?” I asked Serika.

“As you can see, I’m playing in the sand. I’m on the trickiest part right now,” she replied.

“I’ve never seen a sandcastle this high quality before.”

“I’m a creature that always pursues the greatest heights possible. I’ll never compromise on effort.”

“It’s cool you’re trying so hard, but it’s not gonna last long once you’re done, you know?”

“That’s fine. ‘Cause it’ll be ingrained in your memory, right?”

“Well, yeah. A sandcastle this impressive would be pretty hard to forget.”

“Exactly. As long as you remember, my past two hours will be rewarded.”

It took me a second to register what she’d said. “You’ve been working on this for *two hours*?!”

I had a nice, leisurely chat with Serika while she continued to passionately sculpt the sand...

“It’s my serve!” Uta exclaimed, holding a volleyball. “Taaake this!”

“Huh? Hwah!” Hoshimiya yelped. “S-Sorry!”

“Hey! Aiming at Hoshimiya is cowardly!” Tatsuya yelled.

“Agreed. Think about Hoshimiya-san’s poor reflexes.”

“R-Reita-kun? Those words hurt way more than the ball...”

“Okay, okay. Let’s start the next rally,” I said.

“Natsuki-kun, don’t just brush this aside!” Hoshimiya cried.

We all continued our beach volleyball match together...

Just like children, we wholeheartedly enjoyed everything we did at the beach. After we were all tuckered out, we gathered under the parasol for a break.

“I... I’m beat,” I groaned, sprawling out on top of the picnic blanket. It felt much cooler in the shade. The gentle, salty breeze was pleasant against my

damp skin. Uta placed a chilly plastic bottle on top of my head. “Whoa! That’s cold!” Initially I was surprised, but it felt nice to the touch.

“Ah ha ha! You got pranked!”

“Uh, yeah, I can tell without you announcing it.”

“I’m a girl who speaks the truth,” she crowed. “Go ahead and praise me!”

“Right... Good girl, good girl.”

Uta sat down beside me and peered over at me. Satisfied with my reaction, she beamed gleefully. *It’s almost vexing how cute her smile is. I really wish she’d stop rocking my heart back and forth all the time. And I’m taking three times more damage than usual because of her swimsuit!*

“Miori, here!”

“Hey! Oh, stop it, Reita-kun.”

Next to us, Reita had played the same trick on Miori.

“Are you just a bunch of kids? Sheesh,” she said with a smile.

“Whew. That was fun,” someone murmured.

As the sun gradually sank, the air became cooler, though there was still plenty of time until it would fully set. The people who had filled the beach during the day had trickled away with time, and now there was scarcely anyone left.

For a while, no one said anything. We all absentmindedly gazed at the ocean. The silence wasn’t awkward; instead, I felt like staying here forever.

However, the end had come.

“Shall we head back to the cottage?” I suggested, reluctant to tear myself away from the moment.

We borrowed the showers at the beach house to clean off and then changed back into our clothes. We didn’t take the bus and walked back home together—not because the temperature was nicer, but because there was a large supermarket along the way. The plan was to buy ingredients there for our barbecue tonight.

We'd have been a noise nuisance to the store had all eight of us been chattering inside, so we carefully selected who would go shopping. Taking into account who would be useful and who'd won the rock, paper, scissors competition, our party consisted of me, Nanase, Serika, and Reita.

"Let's see. This, this, this, and..."

I was supposed to be the shot caller for what we needed, but Nanase was blithely tossing things into the basket. *Truly everyone's mom, indeed. I'm counting on you, mom! Come to think of it, Nanase's in charge of ordering ingredients at Café Mares. She must be so decisive because of that experience.*

When we had pretty much everything, she asked, "Do we need anything else?"

"Nope. I think this is enough. It'll be a pain if we buy too much and end up with leftovers," I replied. I noticed Serika had slipped in a novelty spice called "Maximum," but I'd missed my chance to comment on it.

"I can't predict how much Tatsuya-kun will eat," Nanase remarked.

"If we don't have enough, we can just make him come back here and buy more," Reita said with a shrug.

"True," the rest of us said, laughing.

Once we'd finished checking out, we split up the heavy shopping bags among ourselves and headed back to the cottage. I'd taken the heaviest bag, which was, predictably...very heavy. There was more to a barbecue than just meat, after all. I had rice, veggies, snacks, and juice. But thanks to my daily workouts, I managed to carry it all without resting.

"Hey, Reita. Can I ask you something?" Serika abruptly said.

"Wow, *you're* asking for permission? What's this about?" he replied, his tone mellow as always.

They seem like they get along. Just as that carefree thought surfaced in my mind, Serika pitched a fastball into the dead center of the strike zone.

"Did you and Miori start dating?"

I'm...quite curious about that too. They clearly spent the day close together. Of course, if they are going out, then I don't have any problem with it—that's something to celebrate. Obviously. Why wouldn't I be happy?

"Is that what it looked like?" Reita returned a question of his own, a faint smile playing at his lips.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"I'll leave it to your imagination, then."

"Since you're saying that, I guess you two aren't dating yet, huh?"

I listened with bated breath, eager to hear the conclusion. Finally, Reita relaxed, smiling wryly.

"Correct. We're not dating...yet."

Even I understood what his words implied.

However, Serika only hummed indifferently, even though she'd been the one to initiate the topic.

"Should I help you out?" Nanase offered enthusiastically.

Reita kept smiling, but said nothing.

In the first place, Miori already likes Reita, so he doesn't need anyone's help. It's just a matter of time.

By the time we'd returned to the cottage and began cooking, it was already night. The large terrace had chairs and a table with a grill—perfect for barbecuing—in its center. We already had a few slices of meat on top of the grate.

Hearing it sizzle made Tatsuya impatient. "Is it ready yet? ...What about now?"

Because a barbecue was the kind of thing that went hand in hand with an overnight trip, we'd borrowed a barbecue set from the landlord. As a matter of fact, I'd pretty much chosen this place *because* the listing had said that it would be possible to have a barbecue on the terrace.

“All right! Leave the meat grilling to me!” Tatsuya shouted.

“Rice is done! Everyone gets one bowl each to start off!” Uta announced.

“Okay, I’ll hand out the paper cups and plates,” Hoshimiya said. “Oh, this is yakiniku sauce. We have several types.”

I had a lot of other lodging options, but seeing everyone bustling around like this makes me think this place was the right choice. The sun had set, and it was dark outside; I could hear crickets chirping. Our only light came from inside the cottage. The farther down the terrace someone was, the dimmer and harder it was to see the details of their face.

Our surroundings were pitch-black because we were in the countryside. *This feels similar to where Miori and I live, but Uta and the others live near the city, so this must be a new experience for them.*

Serika sat at the entrance to the terrace. She began playing music from some speakers she’d brought. The first song was One Ok Rock’s “Kimishidai Ressha.” Uta and Tatsuya energetically sang along while grilling meat. *They’d bother our neighbors if this were a city, but the buildings are pretty distant, so their singing should be fine— Hey, don’t spit!*

I was leaning against the wooden fence at the back of the terrace when Hoshimiya suddenly appeared next to me. “Done eating already?” she asked.

“I’m stuffed. What about you?”

“Me too. I ate too much.” She rubbed her stomach with a small smile.

Barbecues truly are the greatest! I’m content with all the meat, veggies, and rice I ate.

The other six were still boisterously grilling meat. We’d only drunk soda tonight, but everyone was so merry that they seemed almost tipsy—even Reita laughed loudly. Though Serika’s expression didn’t change much, her enthusiasm was reflected in her behavior, which made for an interesting contrast. I had no idea what Miori and Uta were talking about that was so funny, but every time either of them spoke, they would explode in raucous laughter. Whenever Nanase finished cooking a piece of meat, she’d leave it at the edge of the grill, and Tatsuya would snap it up into his stomach. *How much is he planning to eat?*

Hoshimiya and I watched the scene unfolding before us. Suddenly, I felt the warmth of skin touching my right palm. I didn't need to look to know that it was a hand. Her hand squeezed mine as though to check the shape of my palm in the darkness.

I looked at her. She didn't return my gaze, keeping her stare fixed on everyone else. We were sitting in the back of the terrace where it was very dim. We could see the others because they were close to the cottage, but to everyone else, we likely appeared as indistinct outlines. They wouldn't know we were holding hands unless they drew closer.

What should I do? was the first thought that came to mind. Feeling fortunate, happy, and other positive emotions came after. Why in that order? I already knew the reason—it was because I was still confused.

I want to stay like this forever. Her hands are so small and slender; I feel like they might break at any moment. That's why I want to protect her. I want to always be by Hoshimiya's side, hands intertwined as we walk together. But at the same time, there were contradictory feelings swirling around inside my heart.

"I shouldn't do this. I'm pretty sly, aren't I?" she murmured. Her tone was questioning, but it also sounded like she was speaking to herself. Our hands separated.

While I was in the midst of pondering her words, I heard footsteps coming towards us.

"Whatcha guys doin'?" Uta asked in an unexpectedly calm voice. I looked up to see her regarding us with an amiable expression. I was unsure of how to respond, but she opened her mouth once more. "We're done barbecuing now. Tatsu can't move anymore."

"Yeah, well... He did eat a ton," I remarked. Tatsuya slumped back in his chair like a lazy blob as he rubbed his belly. "We should go back inside, then. It's pretty cool out, but it's still hot without the AC going."

"Yeah... You're right," Hoshimiya said in agreement.

Did Uta see us? She didn't look like she was glancing over here, though.

“Heeey!” Serika called out, walking towards us.

“What’s up?” I questioned.

She pulled out a large plastic bag. Inside was an assorted set of handheld fireworks. “When we went to the store earlier, I secretly bought these. Wanna use ‘em?”

Wh-When did she do that? No wonder I thought she was holding a lot of stuff!

“Huh? Fireworks?! Impressive as always, Seri! You know how to live it up!” Uta’s excitement levels shot through the roof.

Handheld fireworks, huh? Very youthful; I approve. I mean, why the heck didn’t I think of that? Argh, how frustrating! My youth powers are still too low...

We first called the landlord for permission just in case, and he gave us the green light to set them off in the parking lot. We hadn’t come by car, so there was plenty of space available.

“Wow, it’s pitch-black outside,” I commented.

When we left the cottage’s entrance, we could see virtually nothing. The only source of light came from the window. The lights from the first floor barely reached where we stood. Tatsuya was still sitting on the terrace in pain. *You still can’t move?* Nanase kept an eye on him with an exasperated look from nearby. Reita and Miori were chatting on the sofa in the living room.

“They don’t want to join?” I questioned.

“Nah. They said they’d enjoy just watching,” Serika replied.

Just the four of us? Well, I guess there aren’t that many fireworks. “But man, isn’t it way too dark?”

“We’re playing with fireworks anyway, and I bet they look better the darker it is,” she said.

Uta was deftly using her phone light to prepare a bucket of water for extinguishing the fire. *Oh, nice. Why didn’t I think of that?*

Holding a gas lighter in one hand and a firework in the other, Serika

mysteriously muttered, “Fire magic...activate.”

Long, thin streaks of lively sparks flew out of the end—a typical susuki firework. She began to spin it around. *That’s pretty but dangerous!*

“Natsu! Look over here!” Uta held a susuki firework in each hand. “Two-sword style!” she yelled energetically.

“Am I doing this right?” Hoshimiya asked, lighting a mouse firework. “Huh... W-W-Wah?!” She yelped when it began to wildly spin on the ground like a pinwheel, and then she grabbed my shoulders.

“Was it really that surprising?” I asked.

“I-It moved a lot more than I thought it would.” She gasped and quickly put some distance between us. It was a complete one-eighty from how she’d proactively grasped my hand earlier; now, it felt like she was avoiding me.

What does this mean? I can’t see the whole picture, but maybe I get it a little. Yet if my gut is wrong, then that just means I’m being way too self-conscious... Still, think about it! I doubt Hoshimiya would hold hands with a guy she wasn’t into.

KRRRSH! The mouse firework that had been wildly spinning and scattering sparks on the ground finally sputtered out.

“We have a lot left,” Serika said.

The set that she’d bought was filled with a variety of fireworks, including a skyrocket; the sight of it flying through the night air was beautiful. Eventually, we’d amused ourselves with all different kinds of fireworks, and the end of our pyrotechnics show was drawing near.

“Natsu, c’mere.” Uta beckoned me over from where she was squatting with a sparkler in hand.

Once I’d squatted down next to her, she lit the firework in her hand. Modest crackling sparks began to fall. I couldn’t even see Uta in the darkness—she repeatedly flickered in and out of sight, disappearing and reappearing at the whim of an orange glow.

Eventually, the sparks died away, leaving only a faintly smoldering fireball

behind.

“Natsu, your birthday is coming up soon, right?”

The little ball of fire dropped to the ground.

“I’m surprised you remember.”

“Of course I’d remember! It’s my crush’s birthday, you know?”

I looked at her, taken aback by how blunt she was being. I could only make out a hazy silhouette in the inky darkness, but I could tell she was gazing at the extinguished sparkler.

“Natsu, what do you want for your birthday?”

“Huh? I dunno. I can’t think of anything off the top of my head.” *I’d be happy with anything you gave me.*

“Okay, then I’ll think about it on my own. I’ll prepare something that’ll make you veeery happy!”

“Are you sure you want to raise my expectations that much?” I asked jokingly.

Uta replied slowly, as if she were trying to ascertain her own words. “I’ll think about you a lot so I can pick something that good.”

“I’m a lucky guy.”

“Yep. You just realized that?” She laughed softly and took out another sparkler. “This is the last one.”

She lit it, and once more, our surroundings became alive with crackling sparks. I stayed squatting next to Uta, eyes fixed upon the sparkler. Until the final fireball dropped to the ground, we didn’t utter another word.

“And we’re done,” she said reluctantly.

Why do fireworks only last for an instant? They sparkle so beautifully too...

“Everyone’s started cleaning up! We’d better help out!”

Compared to the way I was getting lost in sentimentality, Uta stood up with a bright smile and joined Serika and Hoshimiya to clean up.

The time for fireworks had ended.



After that, we showered away the day's sweat.

Next, we played tabletop games and cards until bedtime. When we played Daifugo, Nanase suffered a mysterious streak of losses. On the other hand, during rounds of Mafia, Serika displayed her outlandish prowess. We all got fired up while playing Coyote, Uno, and everything in between.

"We should go to bed soon," Reita said, stopping us for the night.

Tatsuya was snoring loudly on the sofa already. Miori was also nodding off, even though a mere moment earlier, she'd been wrapped up in playing a lateral thinking game—Sea Turtle Soup. I checked the time; it was getting late.

"You're right." I stood up and dragged the unconscious Tatsuya to the second floor.

Serika tugged Miori's hand and led her sleepy friend to the girls' bedroom.

"Good night," Nanase said.

"Mm-hmm. Night," I replied.

I shut the door and flopped onto my bed. Upon landing, it finally hit me how exhausted my body was. However, my drowsiness soon disappeared when Tatsuya let out another snore from the bed next to mine.

I should've slept in the same room as Reita... Ah well. Apparently, he prefers sleeping alone.

I wondered how long I'd spent with my eyes shut. Though I couldn't doze off, time continued to slowly tick forwards. Sleep wouldn't come to me, but I had plenty to mull over, so various thoughts raced through my mind.

Before long, I sensed a very faint ray of light against my skin and opened my eyelids. I got out of bed and peered out the window. The sky right before dawn was stunning.

"Guess I'll take a walk." *Even if I lie here with my eyes closed, I can't sleep*

anyway. It's time to give up. Going down to the shore to watch the colors of sunrise by the ocean will be more worthwhile.

I left my room and descended to the first floor. The hush blanketing the cottage made it hard to believe how lively it'd been yesterday. *It's already over.* I was filled with wistful reluctance. *This trip was a real blast!*

Outside, the dark sky was tinged slightly red, and a refreshing breeze rustled through the trees. As I walked down the empty road, the sky gradually turned crimson. Eventually, I could see the ocean up ahead where the sun bobbed in and out of sight from beyond the horizon. Sunbeams paved a path in the water. It was the kind of scenery that could only be found at this early hour.

Wanting to enjoy the beautiful sight to the fullest after coming all the way here, I made my way closer to the shore. There, I spotted a person sitting on top of the breakwater. It looked like a high school girl.

"Hoshimiya?" I called out.

She—Hoshimiya Hikari—turned around, blinking at me in surprise. The relaxing, salty breeze played with her hair. "Natsuki-kun. I see you're also up."

"Yeah, I couldn't sleep, so I gave up."

"Really? Are you okay?" she asked with concern.

"I got some shut-eye in the literal sense, so my body feels rested." I flexed my bicep to show her how energetic I was.

"I guess that's fine, then."

"I figured I'd come here to enjoy the sunrise and get my mind off things," I explained, taking a seat next to her.

As the sun rose, the sky's hues gradually transformed. *I'd never get bored of watching this.*

"I thought I'd feel better after coming to look at the ocean," she said. I flicked my eyes in her direction; her gaze was focused on the watery expanse. "I love the ocean. It's vast, clear, beautiful, and I feel like it'll wash away my worries and gloomy feelings... I love it so much that I want to stare at it forever."

She did say she wanted to go to the ocean before this trip had even been

planned. And I could tell how much it meant to her when I read her novel too.

“I kinda want to rewrite parts of my draft now. There are descriptions that don’t come to you unless you see it firsthand. I’m sure I can make the prose even better now.”

“Hoshimiya, you’re amazing. I’m enjoying the view, but the only word that comes to my mind right now is ‘beautiful.’”

“Natsuki-kun, I want to share what you’re feeling right now with those who read my novel. I don’t think I’ll be able to convey things perfectly, but I want to make it as good as possible.” The way the sunrise illuminated her profile was beautiful. Suddenly, she turned to face me, giggling quietly as if she’d just thought of a good idea. “It’s surprisingly cool.”

That was an exceedingly normal thing to say. Just when I was about to give a typical response, I felt a peculiar sense of déjà vu. “The sun’s not out and the wind is blowing, after all,” I replied, though the sun was flitting in and out of sight.

It was a line from Hoshimiya’s novel. I’d read it so many times that I knew every single word by heart. This scene was in the final part of the book—the climax of chapter three, “On a Moonlit Night.” There, the protagonists’ emotions collided. It was my favorite part of the book.

Hoshimiya continued to recite the girl’s dialogue. “The sea breeze is pretty strong, so we might get sticky if we stay out in it too long.”

So I followed along with the boy’s lines. “Hey... Did I help you?” I was only borrowing his words, but they still echoed how I truly felt. *Did I help Hoshimiya? Was I one of the factors that spurred her to take a step forward?*

“Of course you did. If you weren’t here, I couldn’t have done anything.” Her eyes bored into me as she quoted her novel.

Hearing her say that somehow made me feel relieved, even though I knew we were just acting out a scene. I was having fun, but our play ended there. One critical difference distinguished our current setting from the book’s—in the book, this scene took place by the ocean during the night of a full moon. The words that followed drew from that situation, so we couldn’t fully reproduce it.

“Hey, Natsuki-kun.” Hoshimiya called my name, not the boy’s. She wore a soft smile as she stared at me. Captivated, I couldn’t form words. “Someday, on the night of a full moon...”



Leaving it at that, she descended from the breakwater. Sand crunched against her sandals as she walked a bit before turning back towards me. “I’ve made up my mind. I won’t lose to Uta-chan.”

What did she mean by that? Even someone as dense as me understood.

I felt ecstatic enough to jump for joy, but I knew I hadn’t earned the right to express my happiness. I hated how indecisive I was, but it would’ve been insincere of me to choose while my feelings still wavered.

But maybe I’m just running away. Isn’t keeping the current status quo way more insincere? I know both of them have sensed how I feel, and they’re letting me put off my reply. And I’m well aware of how they feel about me... But that’s exactly why I need to quickly make up my mind.

Dawn had ended, and now the sun was climbing higher in the sky. Hoshimiya and I returned to the cottage before it got too hot. Our fun trip was over, just like that.

Final Chapter: The End of a Miraculous Summer

The second half of summer vacation disappeared in the blink of an eye. I worked on homework with the crew, went to see the Maebashi fireworks display with everyone, enjoyed my time with Nanase at work, hung out with Uta and the others after they'd finished their club practices, and so on. I even went to Tatsuya's to have a *Smash Bros.* showdown. Every day was fulfilling.

On August 28, I received a birthday present from Uta. It was a simple necklace, nothing over-the-top. I liked the minimalist design. It must've been fairly pricey too.

Hoshimiya wrote a short story for me. She'd even taken my preferences and requests into account while writing it. I was overjoyed by the effort she'd put into it, but Hoshimiya had thought it insufficient as a present and had also given me some homemade cookies. They looked a bit misshapen, but I was on cloud nine that she'd made them just for me. It didn't matter what they looked like; they were delicious!

Also, the short story she'd written was very interesting. As an otaku, there wasn't anything I could be happier about than having one of my favorite authors spin a tale just for me.

Before long, the final day of our vacation arrived. Recently, Miori had been frequenting my place often for god knows what reason. Currently, she was lying on *my* bed reading a popular rom-com manga. *Isn't it funny?*

"Y'know, Miori. Are you sure you should be goofing off at my place right now?"

"What do you mean? It's not that late in the evening." She looked at me blankly.

Does this girl not think about anything? "I'm not talking about the time... I'm

talking about the future. If you hang out here too much, won't Reita get the wrong idea?" *Though, my house is pretty comfy. Plus, she has a personal gofer to do her bidding here—me. Ha ha ha.*

"Oh...right." She looked taken aback. "I guess I'll head home today." Her back seemed oddly small.

"No, uh, I'm not saying you can't come over anymore. I just—"

"I know," Miori interrupted before I could finish. "You're just worried about me, yeah? But I think you're right. Reita and I aren't dating yet, but I'm the one lacking tact... And I'm probably bothering you too."

I couldn't bring myself to deny that. *I have fun when I'm with Miori, and I'm happy when she comes over... But I'm still sitting on a decision; it would be rude to those two if I ran away and spent a lot of time alone with Miori instead.* With that in mind, it was sorta hard for me to disagree with her.

I decided not to comment on it and asked, "Anyway, why *aren't* you guys dating yet? Seems to me like you only need one more push to make it official."

I know Miori wants to date him, and I can tell Reita's at least interested in her. They looked like they were getting along well on the trip, and they spent a lot of time chatting alone. Neither of them are late bloomers when it comes to romance, so it's strange that they're not a couple yet, given how close they are.

She looked down. "Yeah... Right. Isn't it weird?"

An unsettling quiet paid us a visit. The atmosphere in my room felt stifling. *Did I misunderstand?*

"All right, I've made up my mind." Miori stood up on my bed. Her usual smile had returned, and the stifling silence felt like it had been just an illusion. "I'm going to confess to Reita-kun. I've been acting cautious lately, but that's not very *me*... I'll end this battle lickety-split and secure my happiness!"

She raised her fist towards the sky to pump herself up. "Hell yeah!"

Watching her do that made me raise my own fist at her. "You got this, Miori! I'm rooting for you." *I'm praying for your happiness—after all, your happiness is my happiness. That's just how much I treasure you. Thanks for always being*

there for me. I hope your wish comes true.

“Yeah.” She bumped her fist against mine. “You’d better decide soon too, okay?”

She wore a smile, but for a split second, she looked like she was about to cry. Why?



Our vacation ended, and it was now September. The lingering summer heat continued into the beginning of autumn. School kicked off again, and our days of normalcy returned.

“Natsuki, can I borrow you for a sec?” Serika stopped me while I was walking down the hallway during lunch.

Her expression deadpan as usual, she asked with indifference, “Wanna make a band with me?”

“S-Say what now?”

The fun summer would live on in my heart as a series of unforgettable memories. And now in the season when the trees began to turn from green to yellow, a new page of my youth would start. The school festival, renowned as the most important youth event of all (according to my research), was close.

“I’m serious. Let’s change this world with our music.”

Afterword

Summer is the season of youth, so I threw in the ocean, swimsuits, fireworks, and a barbecue all together; I also added a story about being a runaway. Sleeping over at your friend's place while you're running away from home is the ultimate form of youth, right? Right?

Long time no see. I'm Amamiya Kazuki.

Well now, volume three was a summer story that mainly focused on Hoshimiya Hikari. Up until this point, I've portrayed many of her cute sides, but not who she is at heart. I think you've got a better picture of her now after this volume.

Please continue supporting the (self-proclaimed) school idol, Hoshimiya Hikari!

The themes for this book were "future dreams" and "family." Following the trend in volume two, Natsuki was in a tricky position where he couldn't make any direct confrontations himself. I racked my brains a lot about how he would get involved, especially during the midpoint of the story—and then Hoshimiya ran away from home. What a surprise.

So, how did you find volume three? I took advantage of the summer vacation to shift the story away from school. But I still wanted to illustrate as carefully as I could a theme that anyone could relate to.

In actuality, there probably aren't many high schoolers who have a clearly defined future dream. Though, I have many friends who did. Personally, I was the type of student who didn't have anything I wanted to do in particular, so I went with the safe option of going to university. I remember feeling respect for those who had their eyes set on the future.

This time, when I wrote Hoshimiya's story, I reflected upon myself. And I suddenly realized, *Come to think of it, I've never thought anything like, "I want to become an author," huh?* Once I became an author, though, I always thought

that I wanted to continue writing.

I wrote my first novel when I was a first-year in high school. I didn't have any special reason for writing one. I'd merely read an interesting novel and wanted to write something entertaining just like it.

I'd always had many fantasies that I wanted to depict, and I discovered how fun it was to put them into words. At the same time, it was very difficult, and I also realized how deep of a craft this was. What kind of themes, what kind of characters, what kind of plot, what kind of prose do I need to attract readers?

What do I need to include to make someone else think my story is interesting and inspire them to write their own novel? I also want to become an author who has the power to motivate others.

I believe that someone as fickle as me continued writing and reached where I am today because I enjoyed pursuing the creation of something interesting.

My first novel was published in the autumn of my first year of university. At the time, my hobby was writing novels online, and I sometimes wondered if they'd be turned into books one day, but I never seriously believed I'd be published.

You never know what will happen in life. I'm a person who doesn't think about the future and lives in the present, after all... However, my urge to write something interesting has never changed. And I believe the true essence behind Hoshimiya Hikari's desire to become an author also lies there.

Now, it's time for acknowledgments. To my manager, N-san, I said, "Deadlines? What're those?" a lot while I was working on this volume too, and I'm terribly sorry about that... To my illustrator, Gin-san, thank you again for the wonderful illustrations this time as well. The images of everyone in their swimsuits were the cutest...

And thank you to everyone involved in this novel's publication and to my readers. I'm always grateful for your support.

Now then, next up is the school festival. Whose hearts will their music reach?



“Morning, Miori.”

We simultaneously turned around to see who it was. Speak of the devil and something whatever. It's her! The topic of our conversation, Hondo-san, was waving at us.

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+



A member of the
light music club.
Miori's friend
who loves music.

HONDO SERIKA

Natsuki's
childhood friend
who supports him
through his high
school debut.

MOTOMIYA MIORI

An energetic and
cheerful girl who
loves basketball.
The group's
mood maker.

SAKURA UTA

A beautiful girl
with a dignified
air. Hikari's
childhood friend
(and guardian).

NANASE YUINO

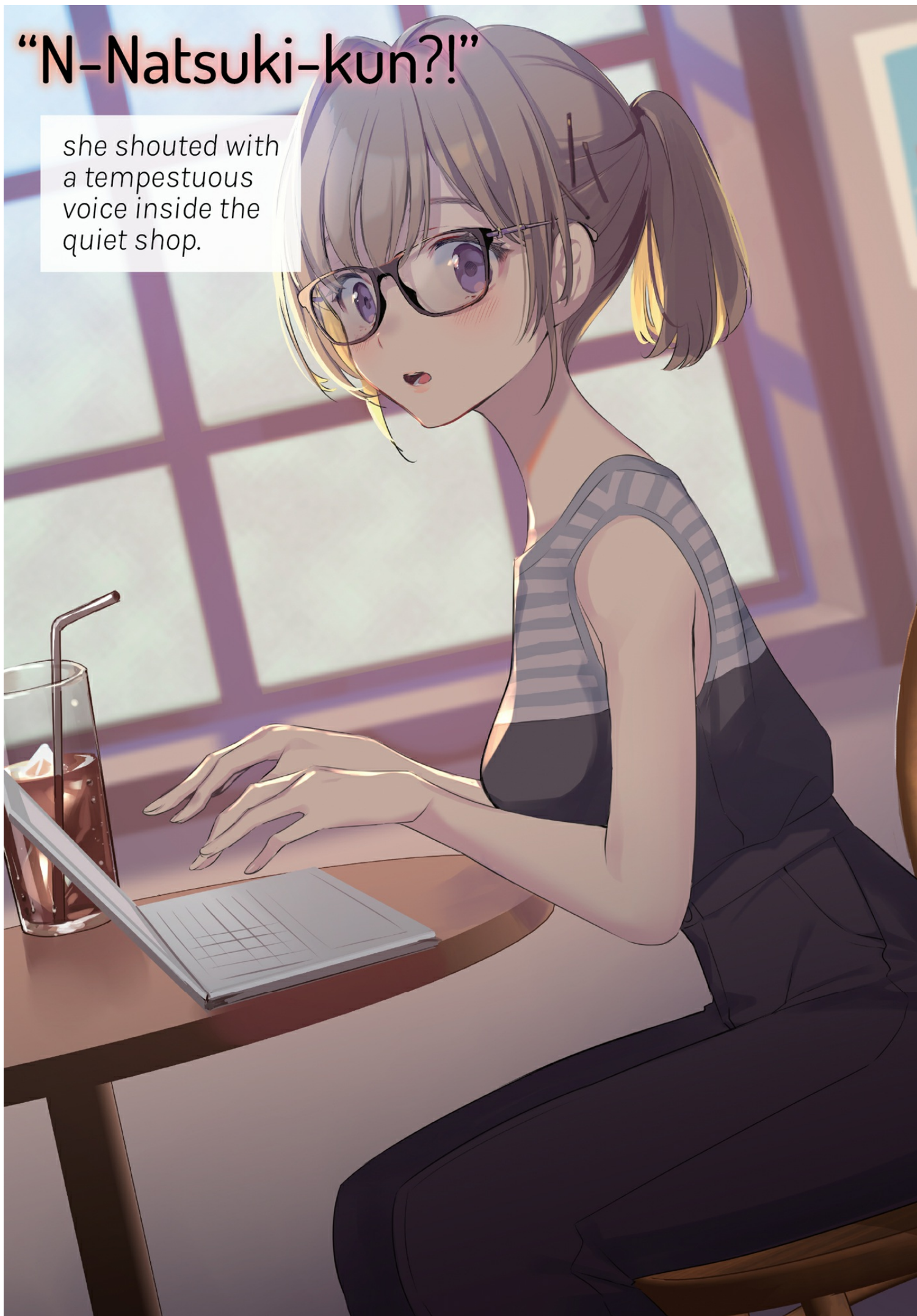
Natsuki's unrequited
love during his first
round of high school.
A beauty dubbed the
school's idol.

HOSHIMIYA HIKARI

The first summer vacation of high school!
Obviously it's time for a trip to the beach!

“N-Natsuki-kun?!”

she shouted with
a tempestuous
voice inside the
quiet shop.



Bonus Short Story

By the Riverbed with Hondo Serika

One day, around the beginning of the second semester on my way home from school, I decided to get off the train at a random station and sit on the steps near a riverbed. I didn't have any special reason, though if I had to give one, it was because that felt like something youthful to do.

Doesn't chilling near a river just give a strong dose of vitamin youth? It's a small downgrade from being on the roof, but the teen vibes are still there. Okay, yes, I've definitely been influenced by school life anime.

There were multiple groups of students loitering around just like me, though I was the only one here alone. I gazed at the river, a tepid breeze brushing past me. It was really hot, which made me want to head home on the double.

The late summer heat was too blistering for me to be playing make-believe youth games outside. *Maybe I should just go home to my nice air-conditioned room.*

The moment I stood up, I heard a voice from behind me. "Why're you here?"

I turned around to see Serika tilting her head at me, impassive as always. Her uniform was slightly unkempt, and her guitar case was slung across her back, per usual.

After a beat I replied, "No particular reason." I would never reveal that I was playacting my idea of high school youth.

"You're out here for no reason? This isn't your station, right?"

"Yeah... So, Serika, why're you here?"

"I'm headin' home. The light music club doesn't have practice today."

"Really? You live around here?"

"Yep. My house is fiveish minutes away."

I had no idea what was going through her head, but she took a seat next to where I'd just been sitting. *Wh-What's happening? Does she want to chat with me? She's always way too enigmatic to figure out.*

Though I was bewildered, I sat back down and glanced at her. She stared out at the river. Her side profile was beautiful enough to almost enchant me.

"Do you...like rivers?" she asked.

"No, not especially."

"I see. I'm pretty into them. It's nice zoning out at them like this."

She does seem the type to enjoy that. Recently, I'd been starting to comprehend Serika little by little.

"When I zone out, sometimes I think up some good tunes." She looked at me. Well, to be more precise, she eyed my earphones that I'd forgotten to take out when she showed up. "What're you listening to?"

"Hmm? I'm listening to UVERworld's 'Arubeki Katachi.'"

"Good choice." Without asking, she snagged one of my earphones.

E-Excuse me?! Could you not flippantly touch someone else's ear?! Oh, man, I feel the jitters...

Oblivious to my inner unrest, Serika popped the earphone in. I noticed her lips curl up ever so slightly as she listened to the song. "Music really is the best. It lifts my mood."

I felt more clarity from those words than anything that typically came out of her mouth.

We sat on the steps by the riverbed, time passing us by. We listened to a playlist of my favorite songs on shuffle. Eventually, after BUMP OF CHICKEN's "Guild" finished playing, Serika took out the earbud and handed it back to me.

"I'm pumped up now. I'm gonna head home and practice."

"I thought you didn't have club activities today."

"I never miss solo practice. I'm going to change the world with my guitar!" Serika's tone came alive when she made her declaration. She stood up and

climbed the stairs.

From behind, she looks super cool. It must be nice to have a special something to dedicate yourself wholeheartedly to. I was so impressed by her passion that I was slow to realize what was entering my field of vision as she ascended.

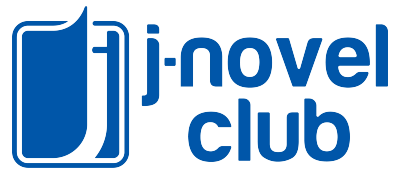
Serika's skirt was short enough as it was, and to top it off, I was positioned below her while she walked up. So...I could see them. Peeking out from between her pretty, slender legs was a bit of decorated triangular black cloth. Flustered, I quickly averted my eyes towards the river, but the image was already burned into my mind.

"See you later," she said, unaware of what had just occurred.

"Yeah," I answered, a beat too slow. "See you at school."

Serika began walking away, but then suddenly stopped. After a moment she asked, "Hey... Did you just see?"

I focused hard on the river, pretending like I hadn't heard her.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Haibara's Teenage New Game+ Volume 3

by Kazuki Amamiya

Translated by Esther Sun Edited by Casey Pritt

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Kazuki Amamiya Illustrations © 2022 Gin

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2023 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: May 2023

Premium E-Book for faratnis